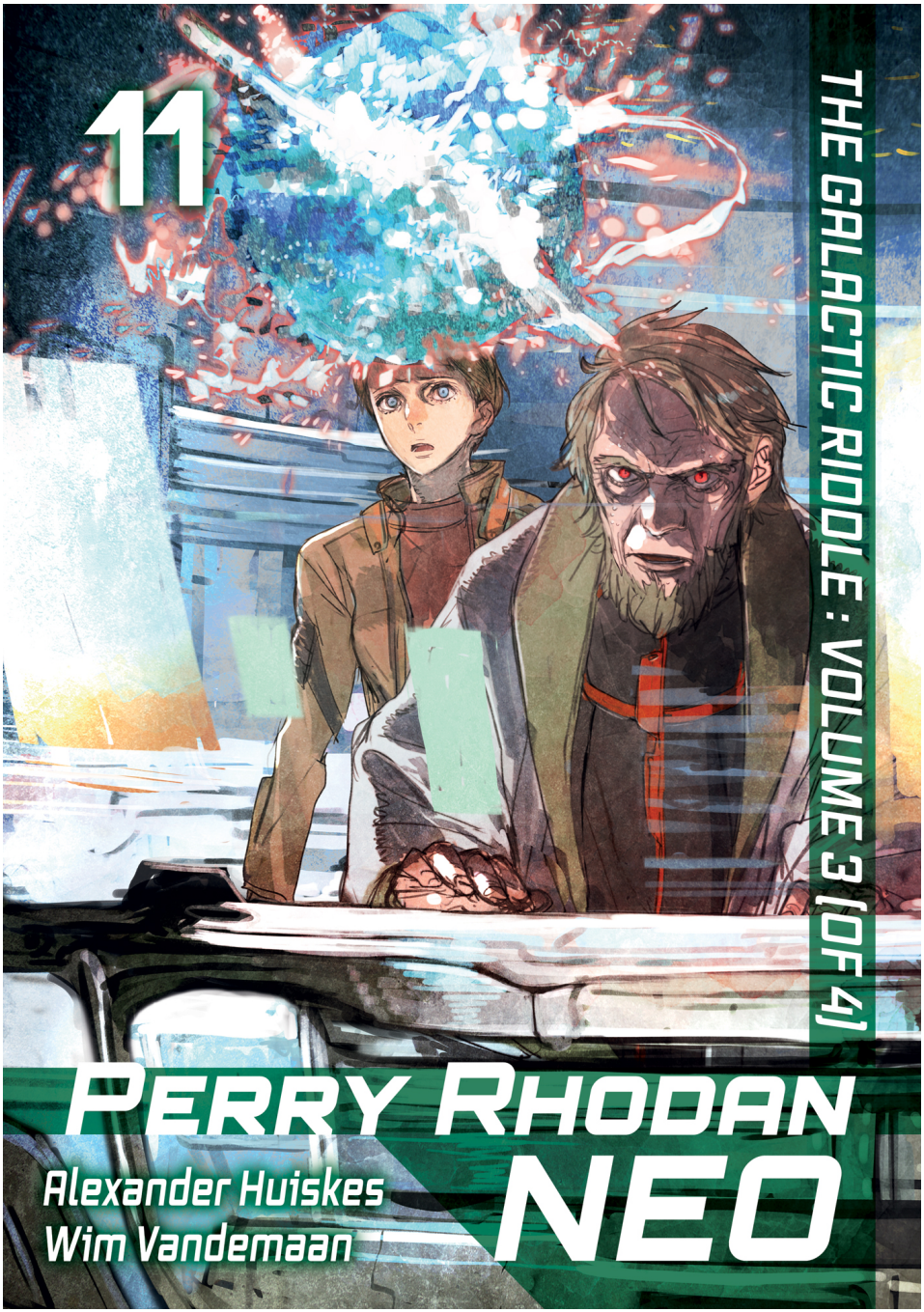
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THE GALACTIC RIDDLE : VOLUME 3 (OF 4)
PERRY RHODAN
NEO
Alexander Huiskes
Wim Vandemaan

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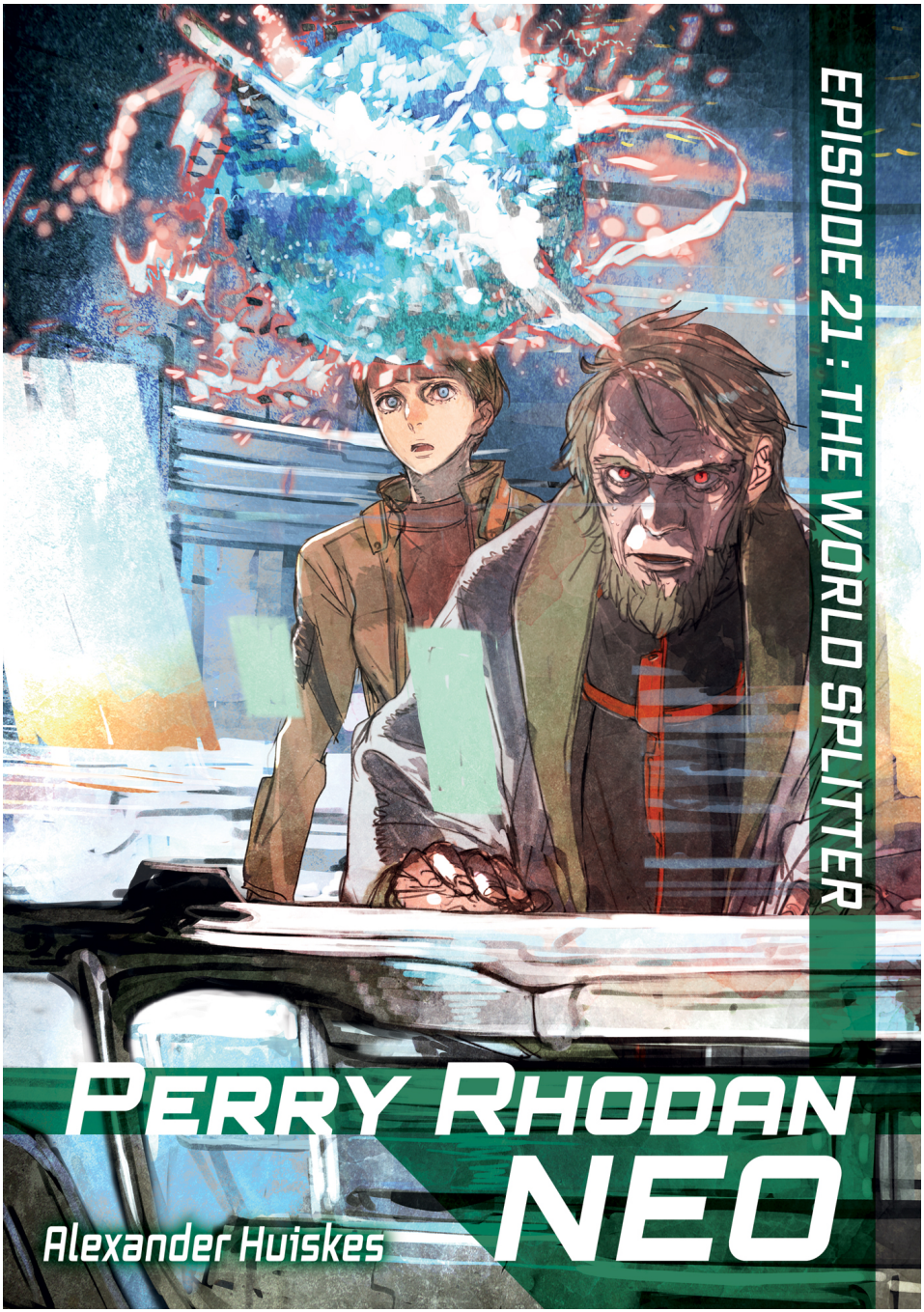

EPISODE 21 : THE WORLD SPLITTER
PERRY RHODAN
NEO
Alexander Huiskes

Shaftgal-Cull: We're receiving an incoming signal from sector three-three-three.

Gal-Enn: The question of collision is open for the time being. Hypothetical visit by additional personnel doubtful due to lack of need; visit by intruders or unauthorized persons unlikely due to security systems; visit by commission or other representatives of the empire high, but premature and unexpected from arrival.

Shaftgal-Xarr: Assuming the commission, direct primary collision and quaternary collision are possible; assuming intruders, there is the possibility of secondary, tertiary, and quaternary collisions; no primary collision.

Gal-Enn: Solution-based approach according to collision parameters: humility. We'll ready a service glider and a sedan glider. Speed is of the utmost importance!

1.

Crest
Unknown World
Unknown Time

An unknown world in a time that was not theirs.

The first thing he saw were the mouths of heavy energy weapons that came down from the blanket shrouded in darkness and were pointed at him.

The first thing he heard was a harsh voice speaking Arkonide.

The first thing he felt was a dry, dust-laden coolness.

Like in a crypt. Where have we gone again? Crest thought. *And what does all this have to do with immortality?*

The Thort had offered it to them. “I see an outstation that was previously unavailable. It seems to be outside the Vega system. Do you want to try your luck there in search of immortality?”

No guarantees, no forecasts; just a possibility. The Thort had a transmitter, but he could not exploit its potential. Did he serve the machine or did it serve him?

For Crest, it meant only one step—one in which his body was captured in one place, thrown through nothingness, and materialized again in the other place. How this could be technically feasible, he didn’t dare fathom, though his people had achieved something similar with the transition drive used in their spaceships.

Crest stepped onto Ferrol at the ivory-white archway under the Red Palace and immersed himself in the endless blackness of the radiation field, and the next moment he was standing in a dim hall, the transmitter arch behind him.

And I didn’t notice anything during transport. It was like walking through an immaterial curtain.

White light expelled the shadows and flared upward, probably sensor-controlled and pleasing to the eyes of Arkonides. Crest, on the other hand, felt it drive a stabbing pain through his brain. Was this just the sudden change in brightness or was he tormented by

cancer?

It's very interesting. How big might the range of the transmitter be? His extra sense mused, that little piece of brain that could be stimulated in Arkonides and awakened to a kind of inner voice. It was also considered a logic sector because it was supposed to help its bearer with their decisions and question their considerations.

That's not important now, Crest thought.

"Where did the Thort send us?" came a woman's voice from behind him.

That was Tatiana Michalovna, one of his companions on this whimsical journey through time and space. The human woman was decidedly young, little more than a quarter of a century old, and outwardly resembled an attractive Arkonide in all essential respects except for the dark brown hair and rosy skin color. She was generally suitable for her journey with Crest because she had telepathic abilities, among other things. She could read the minds of others when she was concentrating or when those thoughts were particularly intense.

Trker-Hon, Crest's second companion, also stepped through the transmitter. The Topsidan's curiosity and obsession with research made him the best partner for the Arkonides. Other beings saw him as a human-sized and humanoid upright-walking lizard with scaly black-brown skin, a long lizard tail, flat forehead, and protruding muzzle. Trker-Hon wore an eye patch over his right eye and moved with a caution often seen in older beings.

"Don't move," said the unknown voice that was speaking Arkonide. "In case of violation, you will be terminated."

"We are enclosed by a glowing protective screen," said Michalovna, making a vague hand gesture. "This means that the possibilities for assessing our environment are very limited."

Crest stopped stiffly. "Don't move," he said.

Michalovna laughed softly. "Don't worry. My need to be terminated is limited."

"But there's still a need?" asked Trker-Hon.

"Don't move!" the voice ordered again. It was obviously an artificial voice, because the intonation, the speed—every nuance was always exactly the same. "Otherwise, you will be terminated."

The glow of the energy shield decreased and changed color: white, yellow, orange, red. Next, cones of light fell down around the three travelers. When they tried to move, they found that these

cones of light were also the boundaries of a force field.

Again, the color changed. In Trker-Hon's cone, the white first shifted to yellow and then immediately to green. In Michalovna's, yellow was followed by orange, and in Crest's, the colors went through the same order as the energy field and ended in red.

"Identification not possible," said the automaton's voice. The barrels of the beam weapons swung at the three newcomers.

Crest thought he could see a slight orange glow in the muzzle. Energy shots were lightning fast and could be fired without any warning. He saw Trker-Hon trying to break through the invisible barrier that trapped him in the cone of light. Furiously, the lizard man whipped his tail against the force field; his hands hammered against it, but in vain.

"Crest!" shouted the Topsidan. "Do something!"

Crest did not respond. What could he have said or even done? They had passed through the transmitter defenseless, like reckless adventurers and unworldly scientists. Where were they, and why was the voice speaking Arkonide to them? The transmitters were unknown to the Arkonides, so something wasn't right here. And the expression "terminate" was considered very cumbersome and technocratic.

Where…and when were they? added his recently reawakened extra mind, which apparently didn't care about the threat from the outside world. *Since our arrival on Ferrol, we have known that the trail we follow is not only through space, but also through time. The Thort couldn't send us back to the present specifically. But that doesn't mean it didn't happen anyway; after all, the transmitter on Earth also determined our destination autonomously. So our whereabouts could still be in the past, but might just as well be in the future or even an alternative timeline in a completely different era.*

Crest sighed. Since no shot had yet been fired, the control mechanism of this place seemed to be waiting for something. Unless it was the arrival of external station crews, this something had to come from them.

"Station!" he shouted in a commanding voice. "Disable security protocols!"

"Command impossible. Enter command code!"

"We're not military personnel," Crest responded.

"Identification not possible," the machine repeated.

"What do you need to identify us, tin can?" asked Michalovna.

No answer.

"We're completely unarmed!" Trker-Hon groaned. "How could we possibly be a threat?"

Still no answer.

Crest placed a hand on the energy field that enclosed him in the cone. "Station! Deactivate the energy shield around me!"

Immediately, the cone of light and the associated energy shield disappeared.

Michalovna and Trker-Hon gave him pleading looks. Their energy cones were still intact.

"Station! Deactivate my companions' energy fields!"

Nothing happened, but the disembodied voice asked, "Do you confirm the identity of the two foreign life-forms as known and belonging to you? Do they pose a threat to your life or to the safety of this station?"

Crest allowed himself a slim smile. The station had identified him as an Arkonide and recognized him as entitled to command within certain limits, but this did not apply to his companions. Not as long as he didn't vouch for them first.

"I confirm that they are my companions. They do not pose any threat to station safety."

"This information is stored in the station log. If you have any questions, please contact the responsible scientific staff who have just been informed."

The energy cones were extinguished, as was the curtain of energy that had already been placed around them. The weapons were pulled back up to the ceiling, and it became dark in the room. But only for a second, then bright white light flared up and tore out of the darkness what had previously been hidden from them: a large hall.

"So it was that kind of thing. Do you have any idea what these devices are all about? They remind me of your spaceship, Crest." Michalovna pointed to a whole range of measuring instruments that were strewn around them.

Crest tried to push back the piercing pain behind his forehead and his amazement at the transmitter and took a closer look at his surroundings. After their experience on Ferrol, this seemed urgently advisable. Who knew what dangerous situation they had fallen into?

Measuring instruments, cameras, and other devices were set up

around the transmitter arch, as well as several screens, bent with plastic-coated steel, which showed simple diamond patterns as they were found in many cultures. The design of the devices was functional for two-handed creatures and seemed strangely familiar. Almost like in a museum.

"I don't know the exact function, but I'm sufficiently familiar with them," he replied. "The Empire uses devices like these to measure energetic phenomena and physical processes, as well as to preserve facilities." He pointed at three different machine blocks, one after the other.

"Station! When was the last time these measuring instruments were used?" he asked.

"Please ask the scientific staff in charge," came the unhelpful answer.

In one of the adjoining rooms to the main hall, they came across several cabinets, each with the Arkonide symbol for research. The neatly placed inscriptions revealed what was to be found in it.

We are indeed in Arkonide territory, Crest concluded. *Apparently, Arkonide scientists are researching transmitter technology here. A technology that I thought I was the first to use. But…there is no one here. So they don't seem to have been particularly successful at it.*

Or they are just on a journey through the transmitter themselves, suggested his extra mind.

"Let's take the opportunity to change clothes," Crest suggested to his fellow travelers.

"An excellent idea," Michalovna agreed as she rummaged through a closet. Shortly thereafter, she gave Crest a suitable ensemble: soft black pants, a jersey-like black top, and a slit, burgundy throw that reached his knees. In addition, she found him comfortable calf-high boots with a wide opening.

She took another set for herself and quickly changed. "There's not much for you," she confessed to Trker-Hon.

"Well, that was hardly to be expected." The Topsidan ransacked the material and finally pulled out a green cloak, which he threw over himself. "That will have to be enough. Let's go outside. There is not much to see in this building. Perhaps we're already expected by the scientific staff."

Crest took the lead. The Arkonides of the past should first see one of their people. He opened the door and stepped out.

Cold wind greeted his face, as if to touch the stranger who had

so suddenly lost his way into this world. The air smelled of iron. Crest looked at a murky, brown-red landscape, then he looked up at the sky. A small red eye burned from the zenith through haze and clouds and lost so much of its light that the landscape cooled to crimson dunes in a sooty desert.

Just ahead, behind a thorny, bizarre sphere, which was probably one of the native plants, something stirred. All that they saw was a quick movement and a hint of fur and teeth, then a cloud of dust came up, and the animal—if it was an animal—disappeared as if it had never been there.

"Nothing." Trker-Hon exhaled, hissing. "We seem to be safe...for the moment."

"What a sad world," said Michalovna behind him.

In his heart, Crest agreed with her. The sight made him wistful without knowing exactly why. In any case, they were definitely no longer in the Vega system; for that, the sun was too weak, too red, too small.

It's certainly impressive that the transmitter technology performs well enough to bridge interstellar distances, attested his extra mind.

"Look at the horizon," Trker-Hon said. His voice sounded snarling and rough. Distrustful. Cautious. "It's way too close and far too curved. This is a significantly smaller world than Ferrol, Topsid, or Arkon." He took a deep breath, and it seemed to Crest that he was trying to be almost reverent. "An old world."

Crest nodded. He was a little frightened when he realized that the action was a typical human habit. So that's how far he had come. Humans were such a young, such a vital species that they were contagious like a mutant virus, even to an ancient Arkonide like him. The question was: was this virus compatible with and supplemented by Arkonide cultural metabolism or would it ultimately destroy him?

"You're right, dear friend. But I would like to know where and when we were transferred to."

"Eleventh rule: Here is here. Now is now," Trker-Hon said, as if no more words were needed. He paused with his head jerking and tongue darting over his teeth, showing once again how close his kind were to animals; or at least that's what most Arkonides believed. Crest was no longer sure about that. He had already recognized in the ancient lizard creature some facets of the wisdom that had been lost on Arkon.

“Questions are of no use without research. You are both looking in the wrong direction!” whispered Michalovna. She grabbed Crest by the upper arm and led him along the hall wall until they reached a corner.

“What is it?” Trker-Hon, who followed them, gasped in surprise.

Where only dunes and iron sand had been in the previous line of sight, dark and threatening, a huge pearl shone on the long side of the hall. That, at least, was the Arkonide’s first impression. It came from the mother-of-pearl protective umbrella over the city, which was nestled there in the dunes as if it had risen from it. They were too far away to see any details, let alone what creatures were there. Such a pale, bizarre beauty did not fit this world. At best, it was like an ancient memory, a phantom of a long-gone past.

“The city is inhabited,” said Michalovna. She squinted, concentrating.

“Arkonides?” asked Crest, more out of habit. Of course they were Arkonides; the whole hall was Arkonide. And Arkonide researchers had to live so close to one of the Empire’s research facilities.

To his surprise, Michalovna shook her head. “No. They’re...many. Strangers. I’ve never had anything like this before...”

Crest smiled weakly. Michalovna had not even seen a hint of the diversity of life-forms that the Milky Way had in store. So it was no wonder she reacted that way.

“Can you tell us if these life-forms are hostile?” asked Trker-Hon.

“I don’t understand enough, but my first impression is no.”

Crest did not believe that they were in direct danger, but the entire complex seemed too quiet. If there was a threat, it would come insidiously and from a direction they did not expect.

“They’re going to send us scientific staff,” Crest said. “Until then, we’ll wait and see.”

“They don’t seem to be in a hurry,” commented Michalovna, wrapping her arms around her upper body. “It’s chilly out here.”

They stood on the top of the hill and looked at the city where the strangers lived, but from which still no one approached.

Michalovna took a closer look at her surroundings, analyzing whether any potential danger lurked nearby while the two scientists

hypothesized about their whereabouts.

"The architecture is characterized by three things: dome-shaped roofs, round windows, and triangular doors." Crest went mentally through those peoples of the Great Empire whose architecture was similar. He wasn't sure of any similarities.

Trker-Hon interrupted his train of thought. "Pay attention to the protrusions and ledges. They are everywhere, but it is not a terraced concept; they seem more strategic than urban. And the arrangement of the buildings..."

"Ah," Crest said, tilting his head. Now he saw it too: the buildings were in groups of threes closer together, and the height of each group was exactly mirrored in two other places in the city. Three-way construction. This made the assignment even more difficult. In which peoples did the number three hold such importance that it had an impact on the architecture? Or was it an aesthetic approach? It was even conceivable that the strangers had three eyes or three legs or...

"You seem so familiar with this architecture," he commented. "Your observations are so precise and fast that I assume they are known to you. Can that be? Such strange three-way symmetry..."

The Topsidan made a half-barking, half-hissing sound. "You could say that, yes. And at the same time, no. We know a world, far toward the center, an abandoned world. There, we came across comparable buildings. But we found no residents. Nothing that told us what they looked like, what they did, or why they left. A sad world. A very sad world. We can learn from it, but we don't understand it."

Crest sighed. It was difficult to follow the thoughts of a strange being, although he believed he was better at it than most. "I understand your grief. Lost knowledge."

Trker-Hon snapped his tongue. "I keep forgetting that you are scaleless. You don't understand anything." His tail whipped up red sand, then for a long moment his lids closed over his glaring lizard eyes. When they opened up again, Trker-Hon continued to speak much more calmly: "You cannot understand because you do not know the Third Movement. Respect life! Get it where you can. Life has disappeared from that world. Ask yourself: did life not respect its world or did the planet not respect life?"

"Could you both postpone your philosophical discussion and focus on the life of this world?" said Michalovna. "We have a

visitor!"

A silvery flying vehicle, which was shaped like a wide arrowhead but measured six meters in length, had just penetrated the bubble field surrounding the three-way city and was racing directly toward the transmitter station.

"Sssshhhh!" Trker-Hon ducked, his tail whipping the sand. "Now we will see what awaits us!"

Crest thought only one thing: no Arkonides. Gliders like this had never been in use to his knowledge. Was he too trusting, and would that be their undoing? He wanted Thora at his side—Thora and a few heavily armed soldiers. Just in case...

"Let me talk," said Michalovna, approaching Crest from behind. "I don't think we're going to have to use violence, though I can't quite follow the strangers' thoughts."

"You're probably right." Crest took refuge in what he hoped was a reassuring smile, even though he didn't feel like it at all. He felt his heart beating faster and stronger, and his knuckles began to hurt as he clenched his fists. But Crest continued to smile. His condition shouldn't worry the others.

Trker-Hon stiffened and made another hissing sound. "I hope the strangers know that too. I will try to appear relaxed."

The arrow glider quickly came closer; it seemed to be made of one piece. An unpleasantly high whistle accompanied its flight, and when it touched down on three telescopic legs, it creaked slightly.

Dust was hardly stirred up, as Crest noted. That spoke for the quality of the technology used. He looked closely at the glider to see if it had any emblem of the Great Empire, but he saw nothing. The surface came without any decoration, almost as if the glider were a poorly deburred cast of aluminum. Crest never doubted that it was a passenger vehicle. For everything else, it was the wrong size.

Then the three-part notes of a crystal lion sounded. It played a traditional piece from the Arkonide military repertoire, and the top of the glider slid under the side panels as if it were just thin foil.

They're welcoming us, Crest thought. *They're even paying us military honors. But who are they?*

His question was answered when three passengers rose from the glider in which they had rested lying down, but the answer was hardly satisfying. Crest had never seen beings like them before. They were huge, fragile creatures. Creatures carrying weapons.

No Arkonides. What's going on?

He desperately wanted someone with military-strategic experience at his side. These beings overwhelmed him.

"Welcome to...zzzhhh...Kedhassan, High Commission," said the middle of the beings from a height of a good two meters, trying to force his three-part body into something like a bow. Crunching mandibles accompanied the spoken words; obviously, it had difficulty speaking Arkonide. Actually, that was no wonder—after all, they were not Arkonides.

Insectoids, Crest thought, *but with an unusual phenotype. I certainly should have heard of them. Three legs, brown, scaled insect body, four compound eyes, and a teardrop-shaped head... Very characteristic and unique, but they are completely unknown to me. I have also never heard the name of the planet before. Kedhassan. Hopefully Michalovna knows what she is doing.*

"It's about time," said the Terran woman, also in Arkonide. "Lack of punctuality is a sign of a lack of respect for the Great Empire! Are the Orgh such poor servants?"

Michalovna felt the presence of the strangers like a slight temporal pressure. When she concentrated, she could read their minds, but even when there were clear intersections with human thoughts, she often only captured details without being able to put them into context. Reading the consciousness of the strangers was as if she were walking along a knife-edge with a bare finger: some were very sharp, others rather blunt, and depending on how deep she wanted to penetrate, the pain increased or subsided.

Again and again she grasped the thoughts, primary, secondary, tertiary, quaternary, quintal, and strikingly often the terms "inventory" and "Orgh" appeared. Since Orgh did not offer a translation and appeared in each of the strangers in quite clear reference, she concluded that it was the name of their people. In the midst of the chaos of thought, something emerged: the Orgh were afraid of a commission from the Empire because it had caught them unprepared. They assumed that the newcomers were inspectors.

In addition, there were so many other thoughts, from intruders and scientists, that it was difficult for her to understand complete thoughts. There was also the strange sensory perception that the telepath had also automatically latched onto: Orgh had four compound eyes around the skull, and while grid vision was already difficult, the matter was complicated by overlapping areas of

perception and the all-round vision that accompanied this eye arrangement.

In other words, where Ferrons seemed almost unpleasantly human and this invited misinterpretations, these Orgh were at least as foreign as the Fantan and in themselves largely incomprehensible at first.

We have no time to lose. We must not stand still; we must continue. Hesitation and standstill are not expected during a surprise inspection...

Hesitating was clearly the worst idea; the Orgh supervised a research station to which not everyone had access. Pretending to be ignorant or random visitors would be a bad start. Especially since they had to find out what they were supposed to do on this world. Because there was no question that this station had a purpose. If they were correct—so far, nothing spoke against it, but they did not have conclusive evidence—they could expect a test after each transmitter run to gauge their suitability for eternal life.

At best, they could guess what it was really about. In addition to pure survival, it was certainly also about requirements such as moral responsibility, wisdom, sophistication, justice—who could know that exactly? The only ones who knew were those conducting these tests, and who knew their way of thinking?

“It’s about time! Lack of punctuality is a sign of a lack of respect for the Great Empire! Are the Orgh such bad servants?”

Immediately, a sharp pain twitched through the thoughts of the three Orgh. *Primary collision!* Michalovna almost felt sorry about her performance, but she firmly believed that she was acting correctly according to the situation. The three Orgh did not suffer, and they did not fear punishment at all. Their thoughts remained calm, even if the term “primary collision” danced through their thoughts like a dervish.

“I am Gal-Enn. Forgive me for the rudeness of the...zzzhhh...to ask for delay is my goal!” said the foremost and largest of the strangers. He spoke Arkonide, albeit very slowly and in a cumbersome way. “The use of this artifact demands our surprise. A different kind of research was carried out?”

Tatiana smiled as arrogantly and typically of Arkonides as she could, then said coldly, “We are testing you; you are certainly aware of that?”

Gal-Enn seemed confused. His thoughts became so sharp that she thought she was bleeding. *Primary collision decreasing,*

quaternary collision stagnating, quintal collision increasing. "You...test us? Me?"

"Your reliability in unexpected situations. You have passed, albeit narrowly. Where is our means of transport? You won't expect us to...walk?"

"I signal the utmost pleasure, the welcome of the commission...zzzhhh...to be able to perform. For our negligence, the request for leniency is to be understood. My name is Gal-Enn. I am the leader...zzzhhh...head of the Kedhassan Research Station."

The telepath raised a hand to stop the flow of speech. When the Orgh went silent, she just said, "The glider."

Gal-Enn's huge but narrow, fragile, insectoid figure seemed to shrink, as if he was only now realizing that he had not immediately fulfilled a wish of the commissioner. "Sure," he said in his scrappy, poor Arkonide. "There, it's coming into view, yes? It should...zzzhhh...I assume that there are sufficient requirements?"

With two of his four arms, he pointed toward the city. From there, a kind of floating black seat cushion approached with a series of tassels at the edge. The dimensions were hard to estimate, but it certainly gave them all a comfortable amount of space.

Michalovna smiled. Who had come up with such an absurd design? Probably some Orgh scientists who extrapolated what would please Arkonides and what was convenient for them.

"Our requirements are quite simple: we want to see results!" She snorted, noting with surprise that even Crest flinched. "My two Derengar are already curious about your progress. I will then decide whether you are still worthy of serving the Great Empire!"

Primary collision! It shrilled through their thoughts as all three Orgh thought the same thing at the same time. And it was only then that she noticed the Orgh communicated with each other, at least to some extent, telepathically. However, she had not felt any signs that they had tried to get in touch with her or even telepathically spy on her.

"Unrestricted display is the least we offer you...zzzhhh...dear inspector!" assured Gal-Enn.

"I came to see results! Not to hear excuses!"

Gal-Enn's four arms twitched, uncoordinated. "Any...time! But maybe you want a rest first? The necessity of adhering to the commandment of hospitality, to prove our suitability to host."

She felt that he was lying. He was playing for time. The Orgh

were not ready yet because they had not expected the commission so early. In this respect, it was the perfect opportunity for them to find out which project was being worked on in this world. But then she looked into Crest's face and read in it only boundless fatigue and a pain that could hardly be overcome. Even her own exhaustion threatened to overwhelm her. The Orgh was right, but she was not allowed to show him that.

"This will also have to be checked. So, fine. Bring us to our quarters. I hope that at least those have been prepared? The circumstances of our trip were not entirely pleasant, and my wise companions are therefore tired."

"Of course..." The Orgh broke off and seemed to be waiting for something.

Quintal analysis, he thought.

"You can call me High Inspector. My name is..." She fished for Crest's thoughts, and he immediately interpreted her hesitation correctly and came up with a name that sounded believable. "...Tiara da Efelith."

"Yes, High Inspector," said Gal-Enn, tilting his teardrop-shaped head in a gesture of humility that he had undoubtedly copied from the Arkonides. "Have the goodness of succession. The Shining City will welcome you with four eyes."

And his thoughts said, *Primary collision possible. Quintal collision open.*

2.

Fulkar
Earth
October 6, 2036

The people were strange. They had such a beautiful and varied planet, but they never seemed to really enjoy it. It drove them away, to other continents, to other planets, to other solar systems. *Wanderlust is starache,* the man thought and looked at the bright blue sky above him. He almost regretted being born under a distant sun.

The man's name was Fulkar, and he was an Ara, a member of the people who enjoyed an outstanding reputation in medicine on all the planets of the Great Empire and many other empires.

The sun shone white-gold and sent embers into the desert at his feet. He had made himself comfortable on the seat of Julian Tifflor's motorcycle. The Royal Enfield Bullet stank of oil and was considered hopelessly outdated even on primitive Earth. It was hard to believe that Julian and his girlfriend had crossed the desert between Ulaanbaatar and Terrania with machines of this type. Wide white robes enveloped Fulkar's haggard body, and a black cloth covered his head.

What am I doing here? He thought. He had believed that if he drove around a bit, he would gain more clarity and the nausea in his stomach area would disappear. Movement, fresh air, and rest...

He'd had more than enough fresh air and peace on the slopes of Nanshan. In the primitive prehistory of this planet, the mountain range got its name ("Southern Mountains") from the fact that the trade caravans looked south at these mountains on a well-known trade route. Such information was quickly retrieved by the Ara at any time from the ubiquitous clouds of information that enveloped the planet.

Should I stay here and heal the primitives? The idea seemed appealing to him. It could be exciting to dive into a completely

different culture, maybe even to influence it.

On the other hand, for quite a while, it had also seemed wonderful to him to act as a special Besun of the Fantan, as the only doctor in their collection. The Fantan had once kidnapped him from Aralon, his home world, where he had owned a large clinic.

I would have to look back. I don't understand what drives me. There's this...yearning. I don't want to go to Aralon, that much is clear to me. But where do I belong?

He turned the ignition key and was about to start the machine to drive into the Gobi when sparks flickered and a young man appeared in front of him.

Fulkar recognized him immediately. "Sid! Sid González! What are you doing here? How did you find me?"

The young black-haired Latino grinned, although the sweat poured in streams from his forehead. "Marshall!"

"You people with your strange powers can't even allow a doctor a moment of solitude. What could be so important? Tifflor will be angry if I don't bring back his Royal Enfield Bullet."

"Someone will take care of that. Come quickly!" Sid stretched out a hand to him.

As soon as their fingers touched, the landscape changed. Nothing could be seen of the slopes of the Nanshan. Instead, they were standing on the flat desert strip of the "spaceport" of Terrania —a country field of which any civilized peoples would be ashamed.

And such primitive creatures can teleport and read minds! How wasteful the star gods sometimes are with their gifts...

Fulkar took a quick breath to cover up his surprise. He was not allowed to show weakness, that much was certain. No matter how friendly the people were, they were strangers, primitives. *No matter how kind they seem, they will never understand the great civilizations. They are not star-born, but earthbound.* "What are we doing here?"

"I'll be right back!" shouted Sid before disappearing again in a lightning storm.

"It's really unfair." Fulkar sighed and put his hands on his back. Fine. The boy loved it, mysteriously. At a distance, the Ara saw some people struggling with wrecks from the Vega system.

The Vega system, thought Fulkar. Another one of the systems that didn't attract anyone who paid a little attention to himself. In the Arkonide Empire, there were wonderful star systems that had much more to offer than a rather exaggerated number of planets.

At that moment, a bright, screeching sound sounded. A glaring star fell from the sky and became a spaceship that raced forward at an insane speed. Its design revealed its origin: a long, thin cylinder with a central sphere. Only one species had built something like that: the Topsidans.

Who brought the ship here? The Ara wondered before a violent gust of wind caught him, pushing him two or three steps to the side. He watched in amazement how, at the last second, the impulse engines of the spacecraft ignited. The ship pulled up hard. And he wondered what kind of beginner was sitting at the controls. At least the people around didn't seem too worried.

"Here I am again!" Sid approached Fulkar from behind. He was holding the hand of a tall, broad man with full dark blond hair. The newcomer seemed a little sweatier than Sid, was wearing strange clothes, and looked confused.

"Dr. Haggard?" cried the Ara in amazement. "What are you doing here? Is there a medical emergency that requires both of us?"

"I would hope so," replied the doctor. His voice sounded pleasant. "Sid wouldn't have taken me out of our rugby game for no reason! So, Sid?"

"Come on! Both of you!" Sid reached for Fulkar.

They then found themselves standing in a room on the Topsidian ship. At least, that's what the design of the furniture suggested. Tail rests and tail holes... The Ara recognized the furniture.

Fulkar's gaze remained fixed on two beings who rested on the rather impractical seats: one was the doctor, Eric Manoli, the other a furry, almost meter-sized creature: the mousebeaver, Gucky.

Next to him stood a person who would not have distinguished himself by anything interesting; even his clothes were as below average as possible: jeans bleached at the knees, brown low shoes with clearly recognizable seams. Could these people not even sew decent shoes? And his T-shirt that looked as if it had not only grown close to the wearer's heart, but had also been washed a few times too often.

"I'm Cyr Aescunnar. And you? You're the strange bird, the Ara, right?"

"First of all, you're in the way. What's going on here?" Fulkar hurried to the seats and pushed Aescunnar aside, Haggard not a step behind him. "You take Manoli; I've got Gucky," the Ara snarled

quickly and pulled the veil off his head, carelessly stripping off the burnoose. Why was he suddenly so hot? Outside in the scorching heat of the Gobi, he hadn't even noticed...

He looked around, grasped the importance of the medical instruments lying around. He swiped two scales of different sizes from the table and grabbed a universal analyzer. It was a cheap device that the Aras liked to sell to their less wealthy clientele. But it would be enough, at least for now.

Haggard turned to Fulkar. "Manoli is conscious, but unresponsive. Pulse and blood pressure are greatly increased! And Gucky?"

"Wait." Fulkar passed the analyzer over the mouse beaver. He prodded his patient's throat, forehead, and chest. "Mmmmh," he said. "Same here. And that with such different species. Worrying state of affairs."

Sid looked at him in horror. "That bad? Doctor Fulkar, you have to save them. They're my friends!"

"I know," Fulkar said. "Stay calm, Sid, you got the right doctors. Doctor Haggard, please come over."

Whispering, the pair discussed the condition of their patients and the diagnosis.

"Anything could be the cause," Haggard finally summarized. "We need more information."

"I might be able to help," said Aescunnar. "We were on Titan together to examine the wreckage of an Arkonide cruiser. There we..."

"Are you a doctor?" snapped Fulkar.

"Historian," Aescunnar replied, about to begin a rambling statement.

Fulkar stopped listening. His thoughts raced, his heartbeat accelerated. The nausea increased. *What's wrong with me?*

"Hey! Are you even listening to me? We barely survived and..."

Fulkar felt the stranger's hand on his shoulder. The touch hurt terribly.

"Go...away!" he wanted to shout, but only a whisper passed his lips.

Aescunnar looked at him in dismay. Or...did he recognize what was going on?

Then Fulkar's gaze fell on Sid. The boy was hastily walking up and down in front of his two friends. The three had been Besun of

the Fantan, which had no doubt brought them closer together.

"Sid, stay calm," Fulkar said again, stepping up to the young man, away from the strange historian who was the only one who had no complaints. *That makes him suspicious...*

At that moment, Sid screamed in pain and staggered. He fell against Fulkar, tried to hold on, but slipped and fell to the ground.

"Sid!" cried Doctor Haggard. "Fulkar, what's wrong with him? And with you?"

Fulkar turned his head. He could only distinguish light and shadow. A gruesome pain shot from his stomach up into his chest. He couldn't even scream anymore. Then he saw the ground coming toward him at breakneck speed...

3.

Crest
Kedhassan
Day One

The Orgh called the city under the dome the Shining One. In fact, it shone with cleanliness and its peculiar symmetry, which seemed both oppressive and impressive to the visitors.

The floating black velvet cushion brought the alleged commission and the three Orgh to a square pyramid from which a kind of glass chalice rose up at the top, which clearly served a decorative purpose. The building seemed strangely out of place, as if it had been put in afterward.

A clear reference to the Arkonides, commented Crest's extra mind.

"Sleeping settlement three-four," explained Gal-Enn. "With foreign world quarters."

Trker-Hon gave off a kind of croak. "How do they differ from your own neighborhoods?"

"You are extremely polite to ask for this. Your curiosity is certainly enough for a Derengar to...zzzhhh...virtue. I'll show you."

Gal-Enn maneuvered the cushion to the base of the pyramid. At an inaudible command, several large drawers, about three meters long, one meter high, and two meters wide, pushed out of the smooth wall. There was an Orgh in each one, squeezed into a foamed mass, with numerous technical devices which probably served to supply the insectoids.

"These are sleeping quarters of the Orgh. Functional and effective," said Gal-Enn, making the drawers disappear again. "Your preference for a combination of sleeping, resting, recreation, and information areas is in our consciousness. We took the liberty of equipping the top of the pyramid with appropriate...zzzhhh...furnishings."

He then let the floating cushion rise.

In the upper third of the pyramid, a platform was pushed out of

the shimmering material, and a door in the wall became visible. Gal-Enn got out. One by one, he asked the High Inspector and her two scientific companions to press a palm of their hands on a certain stele against the door.

"Individual legitimization has...zzzhhh...took place," he assured them. "The accommodation is now at your disposal. Palm contact on purple markings is sufficient to create a connection to the adaptive interactive specification program for care devices. A new contact..."

"In ten hours!" barked Michalovna sharply.

Gal-Enn performed a complicated gesture with three of his four arms. "In ten hours, I will make a new contact. Our retreat finds acceptance?"

"It does."

The "Specification Program for Care Facilities" proved to be a holographic representation of an Arkonide, though clearly through the eyes of those who had programmed it: the movements were based more on those of the Orgh than on humanoids.

Nevertheless, it showed the guests the exits and helped to design their individual spaces. The means available for this were comparatively modest but very effective: walls could be moved, changed, surface structure and transparency could be altered, and they were provided with passages of choice. The furniture and floor covering could be modified within a certain range, and lighting, temperature, and humidity could be freely adjusted by the guests. Only the central area of their accommodations, a room with a triangular floor plan, in the center of which stood a square supply column, was unchangeable: this was the distributor of food and drinks as well as a local communication facility.

"We should lie down for a while," Michalovna suggested. Her skull was buzzing, and the world felt heavy. She urgently had to isolate herself from the thoughts of the Orgh, even if only for a short time. "Our days on Ferrol were anything but relaxing, but the confusing thoughts of the Orgh give me a headache. If someone had told me earlier how exhausting thinking could be, I would have laughed at them."

"Wait," Crest pleaded. "You don't need to take my illness into account."

"Who says she is?" Trker-Hon laughed. "You forget that we are both quite old. And she's right: it was exhausting for all of us,

including our young companion."

"Nevertheless. I won't sleep anytime soon. This place is like a mystery to me. Can you tell us something about what you couldn't say while we were accompanied?"

Michalovna took a cup of water from the supply facility and drank it in one go.

"Most of it is not particularly surprising. The Orgh work for the Great Arkonide Empire, but by no means voluntarily, although this used to be different if I understood their thoughts correctly. They must undergo regular inspections; that is why many speak Arkonide, although they communicate with each other only telepathically. But it's more like an intranet; it's hard for me to get access to it. But one thing is particularly interesting: the research project reports to the Arkonide military and bears the code name 'World-Splitter.' Are you aware of such a term?"

"World-Splitter," Trker-Hon repeated. "An interesting word. Very belligerent, but this is by no means unexpected. Your people often put war at the center of their research, dear Crest."

Crest shook his head. "You're seeing this from a narrow perspective because, so far, you have been primarily confronted with this side of the Great Empire. Just as we initially see the Topsidans in their urge to expand."

"You have never seen Kragar-Gul's nest, the diamond columns of Luter-Gwinz or the rock-cleaving generators of the seventeen moons. Maybe you should make up for it; otherwise you will never understand Topsidans."

"It's the same with Arkon. If you'd ever traveled the Crystal Expanses, you'd understand the spirit of the Empire, and it has nothing to do with violence."

The two wise men drifted off again.

"To the point, gentlemen! Keyword: World-Splitter. Do you know that term?"

"It's a weapon system, you said?" Crest supported his head with one hand.

Michalovna looked at him, and it seemed to her that a wave of suffering was flooding over his wrinkled face.

"No, I am not aware that there is or could have been a corresponding research institution."

Trker-Hon tilted his head and looked at the ancient Arkonides. His claws drummed almost inaudibly on the tabletop. Then, after a

long pause, he said, “Maybe we’re thinking in the wrong direction. ‘World’ has a stellar and a social connotation: it doesn’t have to be a weapon in the military sense that destroys a planet. One can also understand ‘worlds’ as a totality of planetary inhabitants and divide them by opinions. Divide and conquer. And in order to be able to divide foreign peoples better, one would certainly choose scientists from those who can better empathize with their mentality, while a real weapon would primarily be worked on by Arkon’s scientific elite.”

“Excellent conclusion. You might be right,” Crest said. “A weapon that could split entire planets would hardly be left by the Emperor in the hands of non-Arkonides.”

“Unless you had absolute control over these non-Arkonides,” Trker-Hon said. “But how would you gain and keep absolute control over them?”

“History teaches us that no control can be absolute. The firmer the grip, the more likely it is that what is held will break and slip through the fingers.” Crest convulsed a hand in his robe, as if in severe pain.

Michalovna briefly thought about how little they could do for his condition. Before they continued to strive for immortality, the Arkonide needed, above all, healing—something that not even the high-quality medicine of the Aras could achieve. Those who promised immortality were their last hope for him, if there was any hope at all. And they were running out of time.

“It’s all very confusing. We urgently need to get more information. Look for the profound, avoid what surprises you, the strong need a firm stand.” Trker-Hon’s last words sounded almost like a mantra, so it probably belonged to the “social instructions” of his people.

They weren’t making any progress. Michalovna thought again about everything she could have gleaned from the thoughts of insectoids.

“Perhaps the fact that the Empire wants to use the World-Splitter against a certain civilization will help? The Orgh was thinking in strange, abstract terms, and I’m sure he never saw the targets himself. I’m not even sure I understood everything. There was also no name, at least not one that I could identify. ‘These strangers don’t seem to mean a primary collision for the Orgh.’ I have no idea what that means.”

Crest gently massaged his forehead, a new glow in his feverish red eyes. His curiosity probably trumped his pain and exhaustion for the moment. “Speak. No matter how meaningless it may seem to you.”

“Gal-Enn and his companions regarded the strangers as strangely irrelevant, as if there were no points of contact between them except for the Great Empire. Therefore, they remained very abstract, only felt orientation patterns in the background, very different from the Arkonides.”

“This indicates that the Orgh accept and implement orders. They have no interests of their own in mind. So, why do they fear our inspection so much?” Trker-Hon rubbed his eye patch. Was he experiencing phantom pain?

“Fear,” Crest said, “is sometimes a very effective weapon for bringing about cooperation. Often, however, this is inherent in the fearers themselves; it hardly needs to be induced from the outside. The worst thing that can happen to most beings is to be alone with their own imagined fears.”

“And you ask what reservations Topsid might have about Arkon? Arkon’s idea of domination is obviously not based on equal, mutual understanding.”

Crest sighed tiredly. “This is a difficult, broad subject. A very broad subject, Trker-Hon.” His gaze avoided direct contact with his companions. Instead, it wandered to a hexagonal window and through to the dunes of Kedhassan, which in the dim red light of the nameless sun became a sea of red-black darkness. “We, too, have had a lot to learn in our long history... Processes that may still be ahead of you. We change with the times, you know. Even stories that were praised a century ago need to be retold from time to time to survive.”

“You’re right, of course. On Topsid, we use the image of the eight seasons of a civilization...” Trker-Hon began.

Michalovna interrupted him: “A wonderful discussion, but unfortunately at the wrong time. Even if we weren’t made aware of it, we’re likely under time pressure. What if the real commission shows up? Or the mysterious strangers the Arkonides are afraid of?”

“Of course,” said Trker-Hon, as if he himself could not believe that he had missed it. “If you understood the Orgh correctly, Miss Michalovna, the Arkonides are so afraid of this enemy that even they fear losing to them.”

“Impossible,” Crest said. “The Great Empire has no external enemy to fear.”

Trker-Hon raised a hand. “No one said otherwise. In our present day, you are right. And as far as the future is concerned...we don’t know. So if the enemy came from our time, we wouldn’t have to think any further. But there were enemies in the past who were feared by your people, weren’t there?”

“It has been centuries since someone stood in the way of the Great Empire. But the further back we go, the smaller our empire and power are, the more the number of dangerous enemies increases. But how far back should we go? The fear must be so great that it’s passed on to such alien beings as the Orgh. The Great Wars of Brothers, the Usurpatory Fortresses... No. These were life-threatening times, but I have never read about a time of fear. The Garbo Hamati, the Connection of the Edge, the Black Battle-Madmen, or the EdgeWard Star-Eaters...all episodes much too far away to make it worth believing in tradition. And otherwise...”

“Which enemy was the worst in the records of your people?” Trker-Hon pressed him. “Certainly not my people, right?”

Crest laughed dryly. “The worst enemy is always yourself. Have you never heard that before?”

The Topsidan made a barking sound. “We tend to say that the present enemy is always the worst.”

“It also depends on where we are. An opponent that seems irrelevant to Arkon himself may seem like the imminent end of the world to a border planet. If we knew where we were...”

“This won’t get us anywhere!” interjected Michalovna. She was tired and strained. She had drained her special gift more than an outsider could comprehend. With telekinetics or teleporters, one automatically had more leniency because they performed visible performances. Telepaths, on the other hand, “only” had to create with thoughts and language—and what did that mean? “Try to ignore all the factors that we can’t determine: time, place, mythological embellishments. And against this very general background, tell us, who was the worst enemy the Empire ever had?”

“You’re right. The worst enemies of our Empire were those who should never have been enemies because we claimed different worlds: the Methanes.”

“Methanes?”

“That’s what they were often called. They inhabited methane-hydrogen-ammonia planets; absolutely hostile worlds.”

“Inhabited?”

“I don’t know how many survived. It was a terrible time, about ten to eleven thousand years before our present. The Methanes threatened to overrun us, and I think the fear at the time was very credible. We knew little about the enemy, and as I said, there can be nothing worse than being alone with one’s own fears.”

Trker-Hon shook his head as if to shake off drops of water. “All well and good. Could these Methanes be the enemy that led to the Orgh researching the World-Splitter?”

Michalovna furrowed her brow. “It would make sense. Since the Orgh are also oxygen breathers and probably not directly involved in the war, there is little reason for them to fear such an opponent themselves. Do you happen to have an idea of the appearance of the enemy? Big, chunky, more than two eyes?”

Crest nodded. “This could be true of the Methanes. ‘Maahks,’ they called themselves. And if it is them, we could be about ten thousand years in the past. Approximately, anyway. The war was long.”

“Yes, I think that’s probable as well.” Trker-Hon winked with his oversized eyes. “The Thort clearly stated on Ferrol that he could only operate the transmitters for spatial displacement. The fact that they are sometimes time machines was unknown to him until we met.”

The three looked at each other. Then Crest said, “The problem still remains: I’m not aware of any weapon called a World-Splitter that came into play during the Methane War. And if it is really as decisive for the war as the Orgh think, that is impossible. Unless the weapon was never used.”

“Maybe because we prevented it?” asked Trker-Hon. “We would have triggered a time paradox on Ferrol by a hair’s breadth. And we learned that Perry Rhodan and his companions, who are looking for us, already caused one on Rofus by turning a simple soldier into the Thort. Without their intervention, there would have been no Thort!”

“That’s too hasty a conclusion,” Crest said. Tears welled in his eyes. Thora, his companion, was traveling with Rhodan. And they didn’t know where or when Thora and Rhodan had gone. They may have died long ago. “Maybe it was an aberration. A time paradox is

theoretically possible, of course, but we should first look for simpler explanations."

"Why else would we have come here?" asked the lizard-like man. "You yourself are convinced that we are on a testing trip. Therefore, it must be a test."

Crest nodded slowly. "But we don't know the nature of this test. As long as this does not change, I advise caution."

"Okay." Michalovna got up. "Let's just assume that we are in the past at the time of the Methane War and are supposed to do something with this World-Splitter. If so, we must hurry." The two scientists looked at her tiredly. The Terran woman kept forgetting how old they were. "The Orgh gave us the best starting conditions because they confused us with a commission."

"Ah," Crest said. "Of course. We must expect the arrival of the real commission in two days at the latest."

Michalovna nodded. "Exactly. I have already tried to convey to you that our situation is dangerous. I don't know how long we can last in our role. As soon as the real commission arrives, we'll be discovered. We have to get away from here!"

She looked out the window, and the little red dot that was the sun looked back stoically from the horizon. Then, as if someone were pulling a veil over it, it darkened, and night descended over the planet.

I have never seen such a sunset. It's as if someone were turning off the light, she thought.

Almost immediately after the onset of this strange "night," the buildings all around began to glow, only as faint sparks that somehow came from inside and below and spread and rose like bubbles of air in liquid until they illuminated the entire architecture in a floating dance. It was a breathtaking sight, almost ethereal and deeply sad.

"Apart from the fact that it may not be so easy to go through the transmitter again, my gut is against it," said Crest. "We are on the trail of immortality, or so we hope. The stations of our journey are trials. We must prove ourselves worthy."

Michalovna sat down again. "Okay. Then let's just take a look at which options remain for us."

"Our goal is to leave this world again via transmitter," Trker-Hon said. "After passing the test, if possible."

"This should be done before the real commission arrives and

after we have inspected the World-Splitter."

"Only then will the Orgh not be suspicious," Crest concluded.

"Then I'm going to continue acting my part with Gal-Enn," said Michalovna. "As the High Inspector, he will..."

She shot up so fast that the chair fell over. A door had opened behind Crest and an Orgh entered.

"I greet the High Commission." He also spoke Arkonide, but did not seem to have the same fondness for bureaucratic statutes as Gal-Enn.

"How long have you been there?" blabbered Michalovna. "Were you eavesdropping on us?"

The slender insectoid, over two meters tall, retreated a third of a step and raised all four hands in front of the expressionless chitin face. "I am Ogre-214. I didn't hear anything. I have just arrived. Gal-Enn sends me."

She tightened up and quickly found her way back into the role of the arrogant Arkonide. "What's he sending you for? Can't he come himself?"

Ogre-214 tilted slightly to the side. The antenna into which his teardrop-shaped skull leaked was waving. "They need a servant. All commissions receive a servant."

You mean, rather, a spy for Gal-Enn. But if we refuse, we'll only make him more suspicious.

"It's about time. You may stay, Orgh."

The insectoid bowed as best his physique allowed. "Ogre-214."

"That too."

4.

Homer G. Adams
Earth
October 6, 2036

From the fiftieth floor of the Stardust Tower, you had a wonderful view of the whole of Terrania. There was also the office of Homer Gershwin Adams, the financial genius of the Terran Union. He had also been their first administrator for almost three weeks, ever since Perry Rhodan had resigned in favor of Adams. And for almost as long, Perry Rhodan and his companions had disappeared after they went through a transmitter in the Vega system in search of the terminally ill Crest.

Eight people had gathered for a crisis meeting. As usual, Adams wore a tattered designer suit, which he had reinforced with patches on his knees and elbows. This made him look like an eccentric lord, which was reinforced by his strong British accent.

Of the invitees, Doctor Haggard was connected via radio: he was on board the *Nesbitt-Breck*, the Topsidian explorer in which four victims of the mysterious disease were now in a kind of coma. Mayor Bai Jun, star lawyer William Tifflor, and his son Julian with his girlfriend Mildred Orsons, Michael Ott, the founder of numerous think tanks around the world, and the telepath John Marshall appeared in person.

"Thanks to the protective shield, the *Nesbitt-Breck* is hermetically sealed from the environment," the doctor reported on the state of affairs. "No germs can penetrate into the outside world. So, confidently think of me as a guinea pig. If I also should quickly fall ill—you should have a solution ready."

"Thank you, Doctor Haggard," Adams said. He rummaged through a small pile of sheets of paper with all sorts of colorful notepads, then pulled one out, took a quick look at it, crumpled it, and threw it into a trash can. "Request for the provision of Topsidian prey spacecraft, ha! Here everything goes so fast that you

can hardly believe it. Where has the good old crippling bureaucracy gone? So, Haggard, what is the condition of the sick?"

"They're alive. That's the most I can say right now. Sid and my colleague, Fulkar, are lying here, conscious but unresponsive. Their blood pressure is worrying, as is their breathing. I had to stun Doctor Manoli—he tried to leave the ship by force but did not respond to any attempt to communicate. Gucky is also unconscious; he wanted to leave the ship in an unconventional way."

"You mean to say that the Ilt tried to teleport and was thrown back by the ship's energy screen?" asked the slender, ascetic-looking man in a tailor-made suit sitting opposite Adams. His voice sounded tired, but that was probably because he had only recently been freed from captivity.

"Indeed, Mr. Tifflor," Haggard said.

The lawyer nodded thoughtfully. He placed the fingertips of his hands together against his lips. "If we take this behavior as a symptom...do you think it's possible they were identical escape reflexes and that we also have to reckon with such actions with the alien and the boy?"

"It's too early for that, but if I were a betting man, I would say yes, it's possible."

"Maybe even probable?"

Haggard just smiled. "I'm a doctor, not a prophet."

Michael Ott, who looked like a friendly elderly gentleman with a straw hat and had taken a seat next to Adams, cleared his throat and pushed the hat farther out of his face. Then he plucked at his long gray hair and wrapped a strand around his finger. "Good prophets are rarer than good doctors, right? And with Doctor Haggard we have an exceptionally good doctor in our ranks. So, Mr. Haggard, can you rule out a contagious disease as the cause?"

"With the equipment currently on board, I can't make any progress with a diagnosis. Maybe after several weeks using Topsidian medical technology, but even then...the symptoms are very nonspecific and yet worrying. Unfortunately, I cannot rule out an epidemic. But I don't have the cause."

Ott stood up and stepped up to the window. "I think science is like a good walk. You can't see Terrania from staring at a map. Don't commit yourself too early; otherwise you'll block possible solutions."

Bai Jun seemed irritated, William Tifflor slightly amused.

Adams cleared his throat and looked at the others in turn. “Do you have any ideas to contribute? Miss Orsons? You originally wanted to study virology, if I’m not mistaken?”

Julian Tifflor’s girlfriend gnawed at her lower lip. She held up a pad and pointed to several files, the most recent of which had been edited only ten minutes ago. “I looked at the available documents. If it were a virus...”

“No!” barked Adams at that moment. The others jumped up and looked at him. Adams turned red. “Not you.” He fiddled with his radio receiver, which was no longer noticeable, as he was almost always wearing it. “Let the robots do it and spare me for the next few hours, or better yet, spare me for days of all the whining about the Stardust Tower, okay?” He took out the earplugs and tore off the microphone, which stuck to his lower lip like a pale little wart. “I’m completely with you again. Miss Orsons?”

The young woman started over, leaving her pad on the table. Obviously, she had devised a new strategy.

“It caught four very different beings, and very quickly. Subject five—sorry, I meant, of course, Doctor Haggard, has not been infected despite intensive contact. And if we take into account the reports of Sid’s state of health, which say that he was already suffering from fever before contact with the patients, a lot of things don’t make sense.”

“On the other hand, your virological knowledge is not necessarily the most advanced,” William Tifflor pointed out.

“You asked!” Mildred began, but then immediately fell silent as the lawyer’s gaze rested on her. “Frank?”

“Mildred is right,” said Dr. Haggard. “There is no reason to belittle her opinion.”

“But who did?” exclaimed Mayor Bai Jun. “We all appreciate very much what Milly”—he overlooked her expression at the nickname, as if she had bitten into a lemon—“has to inform us of. Don’t we, Mr. Tifflor?”

“I don’t deny it,” William Tifflor clarified. “But we need evidence, or at least circumstantial evidence. And I don’t consider speculation as such. Until proven otherwise, I propose to assume the worst case, i.e. an epidemic.”

“Maybe I can help.” John Marshall got up. Like Mr. Tifflor, he was tall and well-groomed, but he wore simple, elegant clothes. While the lawyer often seemed very analytical, the telepath was

always compassionate without being compliant or soft. “I allowed myself to establish telepathic contact with the four patients. I could hardly hear a clear thought; they’re delirious. However, all four have two things in common: they feel a strong urge to leave Earth and a common term haunts their minds: Besun.”

“That’s hardly a miracle. After all, they were all prisoners of the Fantan.” Mildred’s fingers scurried across the smooth surface of the pad, pushing graphics around and typing. You could see that this thought fascinated her.

“Could this be the solution to the riddle?” asked Bai Jun. “That they were infected while among the Fantan and that the disease breaks out after a certain time? Then it might not be contagious. Good for Terrania, isn’t it?”

“That’s the solution,” Ott said again. “The Fantan can help us.”

“Theoretically, yes.” Adams didn’t sound very convinced. “In practice, that’s difficult. We don’t know any coordinates of Fantan worlds. And the Fantan themselves withdrew from the Vega system four weeks ago, as decided by the peace agreement. I don’t know how to find them.”

“That’s not necessary either,” Julian Tifflor spoke for the first time. “The Fantan will find us.”

5.

Tatiana Michalovna
Kedhassan
Day Two

Michalovna sat on the wide, boxy bed and stared outside. She had only slept a few hours, and now she was waiting for the sun to rise.

When it finally happened, it was like a wink. Suddenly, the distant red eyeball was at its zenith again, and under its stern gaze, the lights of the Shining City shrank back, slipping into a security that only they knew, hiding beneath the surface.

What was the secret of this world? Why had she ended up in this place? It seemed to her that shadows and riddles entwined around every step they took. A song came to her mind that she had once heard in her childhood. It had taken a long time for her to understand it because it had been in English, but the tone of voice had struck her heart. And again it came into her mind. It came from the last movie she had seen with her father, a classic, as he'd recounted. She hadn't understood too much, and a day later her father had died.

Home is behind, the world ahead. And there are many paths to tread through shadow to the edge of night until the stars are all alight. Mist and shadow, cloud and shade. All shall fade, all shall fade.

Tatiana wiped away her tears.

Home is behind us, the world is spread out before us. So many paths lead through the shadow of twilight until all the stars shine. Fog and darkness, clouds and shadows. Everything is disappearing...

She was a grown woman who now sought the stars and hoped that she would pass through fog and shadow, just as she had once freed herself on Earth from the spell of the suggester Clifford Monterny. Everything disappeared if you survived. Was that the real price of immortality? That everything around you withered and passed away?

She got up and left the room. In the triangular central room, Ogre-214 was waiting. If she wasn't mistaken, the Orgh had been stoically waiting there the whole time, while his clearest thoughts kept revolving around avoiding the primary collision.

"Do you have a message from Gal-Enn?"

"He will be here in a few minutes to show you the World-Splitter."

The black floating cushion carried the commission and its companions—in addition to Ogre-214 and Gal-Enn, there were about two dozen heavily armed Orgh—from the city.

"The flight takes time," Gal-Enn announced.

"Why didn't you create your city directly at the location of the World-Splitter?" asked Crest.

Gal-Enn seemed confused. "The investment is not attributable to us, but...zzzhhh...settlement and creation of space as well as construction of sleeping quarters. A question of efficiency."

This would open the mystery of the builders of this city again, whispered his extra mind.

Crest hid his amazement with years of routine of the scientist working with hypotheses. *The universe offers so many wonders, and I have so little time left. We are under the arc of immortality, but nothing rains down like Riganir the Golden. Fairy tales remain fairy tales. That's probably why we're so attached to them.*

You forget that we are in the middle of this fairy tale. Riganir is a mythical figure, but you are very much alive.

You, in turn, forget about the cancer that eats me from the inside. Sometimes I'm so afraid that one day it will dominate me, that it will determine my thoughts and actions and I will no longer be myself...

For every disease, there is a cure. The medicine of the Aras and humans may not be enough, but somewhere there will be a doctor who can help you.

But where? Certainly not in the past on a dying world. It's almost poetic, isn't it? To die on a dying world.

His extra mind felt upset. *You don't die, at least not here and now. Focus on the World-Splitter or the Shining City and its secrets, but don't think about your illness; otherwise it will triumph over you.*

That was easier said than done. Crest wiped the fine beads of sweat, which had formed in the last few minutes, from his forehead and tried to breathe deeply and evenly. Pain tingled along his spine

and into his fingertips as if he had reached into an electrostatic field.

Trker-Hon had meanwhile usurped the conversation. The old Topsidan knew exactly how bad Crest was doing and protected him by diverting the Orgh's attention. This was naturally difficult for creatures that had an all-round view. Nevertheless, Crest hoped that the insectoids did not know how to interpret his reactions exactly. To them, he had to seem as foreign as they did to him. In addition, he was an Arkonide, and thus his actions were not questioned.

"...no other name?" asked Trker-Hon.

"There is no necessity. The Shining Purpose as temporary is determined by the...zzzhhh...service of the Empire on Kedhassan."

"The Empire determines where we stand."

Gal-Enn made a crackling sound. His voice sounded uncomfortable. "Your identity is not that of an Arkonide."

Trker-Hon laughed briefly. The Orgh had chosen a strange moment to determine the obvious. "Indeed."

"But your function is equivalent to that of a Derengar, a scientist of the Empire?"

"That's me." Trker-Hon sounded completely calm. To Crest's relief, he played along. "A scientist of the Empire."

"Good," said Gal-Enn. "Good. So the admission of non-Arkonides to high positions does occur." It sounded like he was speaking to himself.

All around, the bodies of the Orgh crackled and crackled, while they talked incomprehensibly to the others.

Primary goal conceivable, sang the Orgh. Their other thoughts were wildly confused. *Collisions at secondary, tertiary, quaternary level possible. Risk factor as an opportunity factor; no primary collision in case of success. Quintal progress promising. Quaternary progress as* conditio sine qua non.

Michalovna did not understand what the Orgh meant by that. They thought very hierarchically, that much was clear from the terminology, but she had no idea what goals were at the individual hierarchical levels.

Chance came to her aid in the form of Trker-Hon. "Your people are fascinating to a scholar," said the Topsidan. "They differ from our peoples in many ways..."

"You are interested in the Orgh?" asked Gal-Enn. *Is this the*

beginning of the punishment? Finding out what hurts us?

"I only know you as an executive body of our scientific community," replied the Topsidan. "I'm curious."

"Your prerogative as Derengar," Gal-Enn agreed, although his thoughts were still in turmoil. *What is his quintal planning? Or is he looking for the upper levels just like we do?* "Matrim-183 will give you a report."

Gal-Enn waved to one of the other Orgh, who stepped forward and said, without introducing himself, "As you know from the files of the Empire, we come from the planet Orghum and are under our queen, may she lay eggs until the end of time. One day our Shafts will return there if the Empire allows it."

In his voice, like Gal-Enn's, it could be heard that he was not used to speaking Arkonide. However, he seemed better trained or practiced, because he spoke quickly and fluently.

"Your shafts, they're associations...clans...swarms...herds, right?"

Matrim-183 made a comprehensive movement with his upper pair of arms. "They are our smallest affiliations, and we bear the name of our Shaft and a key figure as our name; that's all we need. Each Shaft is subordinate to a Shaftgal such as Shaftgal-Cull or Shaftgal-Plaram. A number of the Shaftgals, in turn, are subordinate to a Gal. On Kedhassan, all Shafts and Shaftgals follow Gal-Enn's command."

Although he was eager to provide information, Matrim-183 hid many details, but for Michalovna, this was not an obstacle. His thoughts betrayed him; they hung around him at the moment of speaking like neatly arranged apples, which she only had to pick without standing on the tips of her toes or stretching.

Between 109 and 317 Orgh formed a Shaft guided by a Shaftgal, and 317 Shaftgals were under each Gal. Each Shaft had a specific name, and its relatives were numbered consecutively. Only the Shaftgals and Gals had the right to a name.

Michalovna turned to Gal-Enn again. "You are very...reserved. Are you hiding something from us?"

The Gal hastily fended off the accusation. "The facts contain no deception, should your thinking take this direction. We have no habit of answering questions of this kind."

"Hopefully you're not trying to tell us how to carry out our inspection?" she snorted at him.

“No, High Inspector, never. It’s just...”

“Then it’s fine. And now you are silent! We are here for only one reason: to see your progress.”

She hoped that her companions would understand how close they had just come to being unmasked. With her arms crossed in front of her chest, Michalovna stood broad-legged on the flying pillow and stared at this strange world, where the sun was always at its zenith during the day, as if Kedhassan had no rotation of its own. Kedhassan, a planet whose substance consisted only of blood dust and black ash.

She longed for the moment when they would see the World-Splitter and its secret would be revealed.

After half an hour of uneventful flight over a dreary landscape under the eternally same sky, they saw something glittering on the horizon in the murky red of Kedhassan’s sun. Something big. Something foreign.

They were wary of hasty questions and tried to look like omniscient, superior representatives of the Empire. The thing in the red-black sand was a huge disc of metal, a good kilometer in diameter and fifteen meters thick. The surface was smooth, sanded by years in the desert, perhaps centuries or even millennia. It lay there like a carelessly discarded coin of the star gods.

“The arrival is imminent,” Gal-Enn said diligently as his guests made no effort to say anything.

“We’ll see for ourselves!” said Michalovna. “Tell us something that we don’t know yet and that puts your performance in a favorable light. Otherwise, we will be forced to replace you.”

The Orgh froze. “There is no...zzzhhh...necessity. It is necessary to wait until the completion of the declaration of instruction.”

“Completion?” She snorted. “Don’t overestimate yourself. We will be pleased if you succeed in exceeding our already low expectations.”

“Very much so.”

As they got closer, they saw that around the giant coin there were barracks and tents, obviously makeshift shelters of the Orgh who worked there. And that was a lot, certainly eight or ten Shafts.

“The work takes place in different shifts,” Gal-Enn explained without being asked, pointing to Matrim-183, who had not moved from the spot. Then he added, “After four weeks, we send a shift

back to the Shining City and replace it. But that will soon no longer be necessary."

"The work has not yet been completed? What about the schedule?" she urged.

"We are on schedule. We will be ready on time."

"So you want us to wait and see?"

"The Gal had a simulation prepared. If you are convinced of what you will see, you may be willing to wait for the last two days."

"We'll see," she said. "Let's get started!"

The floating cushion landed a few meters from the edge of the disc, which probably represented the World-Splitter. Surrounded by the Orgh, they stepped onto the ground of Kedhassan. In front of them, an opening in the wall appeared, and Matrim-183 waved to them to follow Gal-Enn and him.

"Come. You will be amazed at the progress we have made. The similarities with the technology of the Shining City have proven to be extraordinarily helpful..."

"Don't bore us with banalities," Michalovna rebuked him. "I don't want an event log, I want results! Where is your simulation?"

It took them a while to reach the control center of the World-Splitter. Gal-Enn pointed out to them that the interior had been largely destroyed, and the furnishings had been tailored to the needs of Arkonides. Matrim-183 added, however, that there was a holodocumentary that covered all stages of research and repair, so it was easy to restore the original configurations.

"Yes, we know that. Historians will certainly find the list of your stupid actions interesting if you don't provide us with results!" Michalovna interrupted impatiently.

Since the timetable envisaged completion in two days, the real commission would certainly not appear until then. Still, they couldn't overplay their hand, and her behavior was consistent with what the Orgh expected of the Arkonides.

"To get the best impression, my advice is to take a seat in the...zzzhhh...command chairs. The simulation is played in the main holo there. There is a choice between a personalized, direct, and general individual integration."

Gal-Enn pointed to a large area in the center of the headquarters. All around the area were freely rotatable armchairs with hemispherical metal helmets. In wide armrests you could see

sensor fields, holoprojectors, and other technical equipment. The outer wall of the control panel was equipped with monitors, input options, and a variety of unusual devices, some of which were clearly not intended for use by human hands.

"Please do not touch anything. Try not to intervene. The systems are not all interaction-free yet."

Michalovna made sure that her two companions had also taken a seat. "Projection!" she said loudly.

Crest piloted a dinghy to accompany the World-Splitter. He saw a golden ring enclose the edge of the disc, which was lifted from the sand to the sky by invisible hands. Red-black dust veils followed it as it flew into space. The ring began to glow, but it was not a power light. Several blue-and-white energy balls raced along the golden ring, like the balls used in roulette.

The sight was almost hypnotic, and the white-blue cleanliness of the energy seemed like a computer-simulated alternative to the dirty planet the World-Splitter had left, developed on the drawing board. Crest had to remember that this was exactly the case—that he was in a virtual reality based on projections and data. Nevertheless, this experience captivated him; he accelerated the small ship so as not to lose touch with the disc originating from strange technology.

First slowly, then faster and faster, the World-Splitter flew away, and Crest followed it. Everything else seemed to melt away; only the World-Splitter was important in those minutes; not Kedhassan, not Crest's companions—where were they? He hardly cared. Not even the cramps in his abdomen and the bitter gastric juice that shot up his throat had any meaning.

A large planet came into view, a swirling, chaotic atmosphere dominated by ammonia and methane and enriched with other unpleasant gasses. A storm world of the sort the Methanes loved. And there they were, the hated ships of the enemy. Slim, cylindrical units that hung in space like carelessly scattered chopsticks of a traditional game of skill. When the World-Splitter approached, they arranged themselves like metal shavings attracted to a strong magnet, forming a hemisphere around the World-Splitter to push it away from their planet.

Interesting. The enemy's ships are shown in far less detail than the rest. Probably because the Orgh had to work with limited data. We must not rely on everything being exactly as they represent it.

Generic opponents, commented his extra mind. *They don't want to explain to us the enemy, but rather the World-Splitter.*

The chopstick vessels fired at the World-Splitter, but now Crest came into play. He and the other countless escort ships protected the weapon, throwing themselves into battle and destroying the wall of Methane ships. When the giant disc swung into a high orbit around the alien world, it rotated, first slowly, then faster and faster, in the opposite direction to the golden ring at its edge. More blue-and-white energy spheres formed, and then it happened: the energy spheres collided.

Trker-Hon was sitting in the armchair next to that of the commander. He followed the World-Splitter's ascent from the sand and climbed higher and higher into the sky of Kedhassan on the panoramic screen.

Data overlays described the flight more precisely than the Topsidan's eye was able to follow. It was sometimes difficult to read the passing foreign script with the ancient terms sufficiently quickly and to convert it into Topsidian terms. After all, it was enough to give Trker-Hon a good idea of the capacities of the World-Splitter. This...*spaceship*—a term he was reluctant to use—had tremendous potential. Much more than a heavy combat craft, more than a hundred heavy combat ships. Just the energy required...

The World-Splitter had already reached the thin, outermost layers of air, lingering briefly as if looking back, and then it raced through space toward the edge of the solar system.

The Topsidan hardly saw anything from this flight; only the target was easy to see, although he did not understand where it actually was, whether in this or another solar system. The displays confused him; apparently, much had been adapted or reworked with intermediate stations to suit Arkonide needs. It must have cost the Orgh an enormous effort. If the insectoids managed to do such a thing, they represented a considerable power to be reckoned with.

The destination was a planet that looked like a world fighting for its life and warmth in the black ice of infinity. On the one hand, it seemed gigantic, on the other hand incredibly fleeting, as if a ball of crumpled gauze was tumbling between blazing fires.

A space battle broke out around the disc, Arkonides against foreign units. The battle seemed balanced as both sides' ships were technologically matched. However, the strangers had about ten

times more spaceships than the Arkonide invaders.

And then the World-Splitter let out a huge, long blade of pure energy.

Tatiana Michalovna looked up into the sky of her world from eyes arranged differently than she was used to. It was a beautiful world in shades of green and blue, with edges sanded by the eternal wind. She just stood there and stared upward.

A swelling and decreasing wailing tone, an enemy alarm, filled the scene. She recognized it. The Arkonides in their ships came and went, always reliably repelled by the home army. Sometimes you could see in the sky the ultra-short flash of shots or even the slightly longer light effects when a hit destroyed something—bombs, rockets, dinghies...what it was exactly, she didn't know; she wasn't a soldier. But she trusted them.

A large picture was taken over the place where she had gone to marvel at the spectacle. It showed the attacking Arkonides and their own defensive fleet. She had seen all of this many times, but this time, the oxygen breathers carried with them a new type of ship: an immense disc.

Who came up with the idea of building something so big? And more importantly, what for?

The spherical spacers doggedly repelled any attack on the ship and brought it closer and closer to the planet; they did not care how great the blood toll was. The home fleet threw into battle everything that was at hand, and one enemy unit after another passed in deadly fire.

What did they expect from all this? They couldn't do anything with this beautiful world. Why didn't they just leave the gas worlds alone?

She found out moments later. A glaring glow descended from the sky, almost like lightning, but unnaturally straight, elongated—and struck less than fifty meters from her into the ground.

Everything went at breakneck speed, so fast that everything had to be repeated to make it comprehensible to the sluggish human eye: the images froze, giving the eye time to grasp them, and only then did they change again. Michalovna, Crest, and Trker-Hon wished, some sooner, some later, to escape this sequence of images, but it was in vain. The mental projections of the Orgh kept them

trapped in their visions.

A thousand-kilometer-long, narrow but wafer-thin, blue-and-white energy blade sprang from the disc of the World-Splitter and raced through the planet in a single huge blow. They saw what Crest saw: the ships of the Methanes swept away. A world that broke apart, split in half, held at the cutting surfaces by a network of blue-white energy threads and saved from final breaking.

They saw what Trker-Hon saw: it was only a single flaming cut that tore apart the atmosphere, penetrated through vast mountains without resistance, was not slowed down or extinguished by deep seas, and did not care about the magma heart of a world.

They saw what Michalovna saw: the glow not only struck, but cut the ground and raced deeper, as far as her gaze could see. Houses were smashed, entire mountain ridges, as worn out as they were, fell apart. Then came the fire that broke out like the lifeblood of the planet, molten rock, burning gas... She saw her neighbor dissolve in the unbearable heat. Her mouth was burning, her feet were melting...

A single incision, surgical, fast, and barely recognizable, even if you resolved every second into a hundred thousand images. Pictures that spoke.

Crest broke away from the projection. His eyes were watering. *Such a power...*

Trker-Hon shook off the forced images. *A terrible weapon...*

Michalovna woke up and escaped the death that had engulfed her in the simulation.

"Does the hope of having contributed to your satisfaction bear merit?" Gal-Enn's strange voice broke the silence after the presentation ended.

"It's no less than we expected," said Michalovna, although she was salivating. What she had just seen was impossible, pure imagination. Literally splitting a planet and preserving both halves... It wasn't technology, it was magic.

Crest made a strangling sound. His hands cramped around the armrests, whether from mental or physical pain, she couldn't tell.

"And you are sure that you can complete the work within two days and guarantee the full functionality of the World-Splitter?" asked Trker-Hon so equanimously that every fool had to realize that he was acting.

“In two days,” Gal-Enn confirmed. “I suppose our existence is justified?”

Michalovna thought only briefly. “I will recommend it in my report,” she replied.

Primary collision with decreasing probability, Gal-Enn thought, relieved. *Quaternary successes probable. Consequential effects secondary and tertiary conceivable.*

“For today, we will leave you to your work. Beware of disappointing us.”

Gal-Enn proceeded. “A disappointment is...zzzhhh...not intentional.”

Crest trembled as he left the World-Splitter; he felt as if he no longer had control over his body. *That was horrible,* he thought.

Fairy tale technology, his extra mind said. *Used here for destruction. This does not preclude the fact that the World-Splitter was constructed for other purposes.*

What purpose could it serve other than warfare?

That’s what we should find out. And above all: what has become of it?

Crest pushed back the pain that made his chest tight. *Can we even allow such a thing to exist? Even if it is the only way to win the war?*

The extra sense remained silent for a moment. *Are we allowed to mess with our limited horizons in the past? Remember that the Emperor will decide on the use of this weapon, and the Emperor is wise. He will not use it, no matter what his military strategists recommend.*

These were different times than the present, Crest thought. *I don’t know how great the Empire’s plight really is. Are we changing the timeline with what we do? Are we perhaps even fulfilling it? Or is everything irrelevant because we are acting in a parallel reality anyway?*

We don’t know, his extra mind admitted.

“Careful! Get back!” shouted one of the Orgh at that moment and pointed to the dune desert. In the eternal black-and-red shadow play of the sand, Crest found it difficult to recognize the cause of his warning.

A stone flew in, fist-sized, but thrown with such force and so precisely that it broke smoothly through the body armor of an Orgh. And then the weapons spoke: in the bright white of their discharges, which met at a single point barely a hundred meters

away, Crest saw a small black shadow crack, the soft contours hairy. An animal, the first one they had seen on Kedhassan. And apparently a particularly dangerous one.

"What—" Michalovna began.

"I apologize for the inconvenience," Gal-Enn said. "Shaftgal-Cull has eliminated them."

Crest followed up: "What kind of inconvenience was that? Does this pose a danger?"

Gal-Enn laughed, crackling. "Just an...zzzhhh...Ilt. No need to worry."

6.

Skelir
Sregar-Nakut
October 7, 2036

“Watch out,” Jenves warned. “Not too close to the system, you know?” He grabbed Skelir with a tattooed hand and pushed him away from the controls of their spindle ship. With only four instead of six limbs, Skelir was always inferior to him in case of doubt.

The *Sregar-Nakut* flew beyond the outermost planetary orbit, all sensors as curious eyes and ears aligned to the multiplanetary system of Vega.

Skelir pointed to a hologram. “We’re outside the Vega system, you see? This is where the border runs. We aren’t violating any contract. Don’t be so nervous.” His finely scaled, light-blue cylindrical body wobbled. “It would be a pity to give up too quickly. Just think of the fortieth planet.”

“We’re not allowed to go there anymore,” Jenves said quickly, perhaps a little too quickly. Skelir knew that he was at least as sorry as Skelir himself was for the sin they had hidden there.

“Four weeks ago, the deadline given by the peace treaty to search for Besun in the remnants of the battle expired.” Jenves repeated the well-known rule.

“The best Besun come unexpectedly,” Skelir replied. “And since we don’t expect anything out of the ordinary at the moment, I conclude that we will soon encounter a Besun.”

“Besun” was a term from the language of the Fantan that remained untranslatable for most other peoples. It corresponded most closely to “value.” Everything and nothing could be Besun: a spaceship, a work of art, a plant or living being, or even a moment. And the search for the most beautiful, the best, and the rarest Besun drove the Fantan out into space.

“Yes, that sounds plausible. But will we encounter the Besun here as well, or should we have gone elsewhere?”

“Since our targeted search was no longer effective, it would of course have to be more productive elsewhere,” Skelir instructed him. “But we will still find Besun here, because it will come unexpectedly. And nowhere would it be more unexpected than here. Do you understand?”

“Oh!” Jenves said.

“What is it? I just wanted to get something to eat from the galley.”

“You mean the food replicator. Wait a little longer. I picked up an emergency call.”

Skelir leaned over to him with interest. “A very weak emergency call. Close by.”

“From within the system,” Jenves pointed out.

“An emergency call is an exceptional situation. We have to react; everyone understands that.” He smacked softly. “It’s not far.”

Jenves looked at his companion. “Between the two outermost planetary orbits... We are very close. It would be unfair not to offer them our help.”

“That’s the way it is.” Skelir chuckled. “So: go or not go?”

“Go,” Jenves replied, pointing the spindle ship toward the source of the distress call.

A huge, four-kilometer-long Ferron freighter, which looked like a monstrous caterpillar with a multisegmented body, drifted aimlessly between the planets.

“Ore transporter,” Skelir suggested.

“Badly damaged,” Jenves added.

The two exchanged glances. “Actually... Actually, this is a far too tempting situation. That’s why there’s something wrong with this ship. Why wasn’t it recovered by other Fantan immediately after the peace agreement?”

“Maybe because we had so much else to do. No one noticed,” Skelir reasoned, emphasizing his words with movements of three of his four limbs.

“And why haven’t the Ferrons themselves salvaged it in the meantime?”

“You could just as well ask how a Ferron ship can send a hyper-radio emergency call at all, since the Vega inhabitants are known to possess no five-dimensional technology.”

“Right,” Jenves answered. “I could have come up with that

myself."

"So there is a lot to be said for flying away again," Skelir said disappointedly. "By doing so, we'd probably be doing the same as everyone else. I don't think I want that. Do you?"

Jenves leaned against the wall. "I like to do what others do."

"Collect Besun," Skelir reminded him.

"Right."

A few minutes later, they flew off in a small dinghy. The glances of hundreds of envious Fantan who remained on board followed them.

7.

Gal-Enn
Kedhassan
Day two, night

Gal-Enn left the luminous buildings of the Shining City behind him. In the typical three-step gait of his people, he trudged through the iron oxide sand, out into the black expanse of Kedhassan. The sun would still be veiled for hours, and a long night still reigned over the dead world.

Only artifacts of a former heyday of the former inhabitants were left: the Shining City and the World-Splitter. They, too, would disappear when the energy umbrella finally went out. How long had it been since the Orgh had discovered this strange planet? An earlier Gal, his predecessor, had begun settlement; that was several decades ago. Meanwhile, around 60,000 Orgh in 248 Shafts populated this small world, where gravity was just under half as high as on Orghum and where the days were only as bright as the nights at home.

It seemed to have been an excellent idea at the time. It ensured the survival of his people. It increased their fame. It increased their knowledge. And then everything had gone wrong. Their curiosity had caused doom—the encounter with the Great Empire and its relentless demand to repair the World-Splitter.

The demand had to be met. There was no other way. The queen had become a hostage on their own world, surrounded by Arkonide fighting robots. Orghum enclosed by guard satellites of the Empire. Would Kedhassan drink the colorless blood of the Orgh? Everything pointed toward that outcome. The Orgh would be wiped out if they failed to satisfy the Empire and determine the future value of their race. But the foreign scientist, this Trker-Hon, was an example that it was possible to survive.

Gal-Enn always let the respective two back feet spin a little before putting them down, so every Orgh recognized him from afar.

That's how it should be. He was their Gal. Shaftgal-Cull awaited him and accompanied him to the next hill. The other Shaftgals had already arrived.

In the sky shimmered the soft, pulsating lights of the night which mostly looked like colored, writhing ribbons, occasionally like dancing multicolored balls. Sometimes they came up with dimly recognizable images of places or living beings, and Gal-Enn puzzled over their meaning. The nights on Kedhassan calmed and inspired him, even in the face of death, and although he knew all too well the cause of these luminous phenomena, it was so much more pleasant to be able to indulge in the illusion that somewhere in the universe there was a divine hand that sent them signs.

That night, he would not be able to enjoy the spectacle in the sky. He had asked the Shaftgals there, and he would listen to them. They saw him coming, and their thoughts came upon him like water shooting through a bursting dam.

Shaft one reports an inadmissible console connection in the upper disc segment of the World-Splitter. Cause unknown. Quaternary problem.

Shaft two has completed the lining of the aisles; information terminals are available.

Shaft three reports that programmers struggle with a universal interface that always resets multipart requests.

Shaft four...

Gal-Enn sent out a strong impulse via his head antenna, which provided peace in the telepathic network.

If we do not succeed in putting the World-Splitter into operation the day after tomorrow, the Arkonides will destroy Orghum, he proclaimed.

It was something everyone should know, but he wanted them to be constantly aware of it. The preservation of their people was a top priority, and without the Queen, the Orgh were a dying species. They were not allowed to fail!

I expect solutions, Gal-Enn said. *Just as I submit to the commission to save us, you must do what is necessary. This is the way to go. The commission has signaled to me that we are working satisfactorily. If we succeed in obeying the priority, all secondary and further levels have a chance of increased success. We...*

A sharp telepathic impulse interrupted him. It had come from Shaftgal-Cull, who belonged to his preferred thought tercet; he had accompanied Gal-Enn and the commission that day.

I agree on what needs to be done. But I fear that the priority collision has not been prevented. I do not trust the commission, at least this commission. It came through the transmitter; it did not land by ship and then visit the transmitter, but it used it. In addition, it was much too early. It has never been too early.

Assuming they were using the transmitter for the first time, they might break open as if they were subject to the restrictions on spaceship traffic. However, their transport was at zero, so they appeared much earlier than planned, Gal-Enn argued.

Shaftgal-Cull conceded this but had other objections. *Did you take a close look at the representatives? Only one looks like the Arkonides we know. The woman has the appearance, but only the basic physique, and Derengar Trker-Hon is the first non-Arkonide who ever accompanied a commission.*

I know. It's different than usual. But everything is changing. Can we take the risk of assuming they are fraudsters? If we are wrong, they will make sure that our queen dies. We must treat the commission with reverence; our homeland is at stake. And even if it were not, what danger would it pose to us?

They underestimate the explosiveness. Can we trust them blindly? If they are not the right commission, the right one will ensure that our queen dies because she can accuse us of betrayal.

We will lose one way or another if we decide, Gal-Enn recognized.

The mental murmur of the Shaftgals swelled. Everyone felt the insecurity of the other, and all this was transferred to the Gal. Finally, Gal-Enn made a decision. He turned directly to Shaftgal-Cull.

Ensure that the commission can be eliminated in a moment, should I conclude that this is necessary. Ogre-214 will keep us up to date.

He looked up at the colorful ribbons that symbolized the gradual failure of the energy screen.

It is for the good of our people.

Crest
Kedhassan
Day two, night

The red eye in the sky had disappeared, as if a huge hand had wiped it away, and the sparks rose from the Shining City to gradually illuminate it. Night reigned on Kedhassan, starless and

filled with strange, colorful streaks of light, like energy fluctuations on a protective screen.

Crest watched the spectacle silently from his quarters. Only the sleep pyramids of the Orgh remained dark, foreign bodies in this strange beauty, like cancerous ulcers...

It's like me, Crest thought. His body hurt in this vague, diffused way that reminded him of the nagging death eating him up without anyone being able to stop it. *The city suffers from the raw addition made by the Orgh, who do not belong here.*

His extra mind chimed in, *Look at the lighting. Doesn't it remind you of the sparks that circled the World-Splitter? This could suggest that the builders of these two artifacts of Kedhassan are identical. However, we have already experienced some surprises on this world.*

Crest rubbed his right wrist to banish the pain. *Beauty and annihilation are obviously close together. I cannot deal with these questions now.*

You must not let pain gain the upper hand! His extra mind insisted.

Crest trembled, the pain making him shiver, although at the same time, he chased fire through his body. It got worse and worse. *That's easier said than...done.*

With a hissing sound, the door opened, revealing Ogre-214. "The High Inspector invites your Derengar into the meeting room."

"I'm coming."

Slowly, he walked past the Orgh to Trker-Hon and Michalovna, who were already waiting for him.

"Do you need more rest?" inquired the Topsidan worriedly. "You smell of pain."

Crest smiled weakly. "Their olfactory receptors are probably a little too sensitive. Don't worry, I'm doing well considering the circumstances. It was a long day."

"The day was as long as any other," Ogre-214 disagreed without understanding.

Michalovna turned to him. "Thank you! You can leave now. We have internal matters to discuss that only concern the commission."

"I shall be at your service," the insectoid dared to object.

"If we need something, we will call you via the proper program."

"As you wish." Ogre-214 turned around and staggered out of the room in the strange, kneeless running style of the Orgh: one leg

indicated the direction of travel; the other two to the left and right of it were synchronously placed forward over it. The telescopic construction of the legs made this possible.

After he disappeared and was out of earshot, the three time travelers sat down together.

"Do you want to start, Crest?" asked Michalovna.

Crest made a brief gesture of approval. "This day has given us more puzzles than it solved. The first, and at the same time the most dangerous, is the World-Splitter; the second concerns its designers, and the third—well, it seems to me to be comparatively small: the Ilt."

Michalovna nodded. "That's right, the Ilt. Like Gucky."

"Yes, that's it." Crest shrugged his shoulders. "Unless it is a coincidental name similarity, we are dealing with an ancient people if they still exist in our present."

"Let's assume it's not an accidental similarity," Michalovna suggested. "How much of a coincidence do you think it is that in the distant past we end up on the world of the Ilts after we have met one of them in the present? And do all Ilts have paranormal abilities like Gucky? So far, he seemed to me to be quite buttoned up as far as his people were concerned."

"It may be a coincidence," Crest said. "We also didn't see the Ilt well enough to be able to determine an actual resemblance to Gucky."

"A very unlikely coincidence," Trker-Hon interfered. "So unlikely that it is rather the opposite of it. But if that's the case, we don't understand the message behind it."

"Which brings us to the next point: could the Ilts be the builders of these plants? If they all have such strong psychic abilities like Gucky...did they build this city and the World-Splitter?" Michalovna jumped up and walked restlessly around the table. Crest believed she felt what was going on without daring to say it.

"If they were, they could be the same beings who know eternal life. Then Kedhassan would be identical to the world of Eternal Life and it would be logical to assume that Gucky is behind our test trip or at least watching it." Crest smiled. "Do you really think it could be that easy?"

Michalovna froze. "Am I so easy to see through? Believe me, Crest, and you too, Trker-Hon, I am not an adventurer chasing eternal youth. But I confess that I find the idea fascinating. It's a

riddle I want to solve. And a means that I would certainly use if I saw the need for it. But right now, I don't even know if I would accept immortality. I don't understand the consequences yet; I have no idea what price it would cost me."

"Plenty of words," Trker-Hon remarked, leaving open exactly what he meant by that.

"I didn't mean to step on your toes or accuse you of selfish motives, Tatiana," Crest apologized. "I just believe that the one who puts us through these tests has more complex ideas than we can grasp right away. We may be dealing with completely different things."

"Or with only seemingly different things, which actually have to be put together like a puzzle."

"Fine." The Topsidan yawned, showing his impressive predatory teeth. "If I were to put up a ranking, the World-Splitter would undoubtedly be at the top. It's such an unimaginably terrible weapon that it must never be used. I suppose there is agreement between us on that?"

When no one answered, Trker-Hon continued, "We just have to decide what to do. Option A: do we trust in our knowledge of history and do nothing because we know that the World-Splitter was never used? Option B: are we trying to prevent its commissioning so that our historical perspective becomes reality? Option C: do we assume that the information about its use has been deleted and act in the way that seems feasible to us without risking our lives?"

"In short, do we risk a time paradox or not?" asked Michalovna.

Crest smiled. This young woman was so wonderfully impatient, so full of life. So...

A sudden spasm gripped him. "I... Miss Michal..."

Concentrate! Think away the pain! His extra mind spoke to him.

He tried, but the pain threw his body around without him being able to do anything about it; torment flourished everywhere. His lungs burned and robbed him of the air to speak.

"...lovna..."

You will die if you do nothing! Had his extra mind always been so loud? The words almost blew through Crest's skull.

He saw them staring at him, saw the horror in Michalovna's eyes. *Has she seen many die?* he wondered, and then his gaze went dark.

Tatiana Michalovna
Kedhassan
Day two, night

Something had been worrying Michalovna all along, though she couldn't say exactly what it was. The distractions had been too much; the search for thoughts among the Orgh too exhausting.

But now she recognized it again: with frightened eyes, she stared at Crest. That strange voice she sometimes heard when she touched Crest's thoughts, like an echo of thoughts that someone else had... She hadn't experienced it in quite a while, but in that moment, it was back.

You'll die if you do nothing! A terrible question glowed within him and was so loud and so clear that she didn't even have to make an effort to perceive it: *Has she seen many die?*

She leaped to Crest's aid as he fell, catching him and preventing him from injuring himself. After carefully letting him slide to the ground, soaked in sweat and freezing cold, she activated the service hologram.

"Ogre-214 will come here! Right away! We need a doctor or a miracle healer or whoever is available!"

The holo shook its head. "With pleasure. Ogre-214 is already informed. Specify your wish."

She sat next to Crest and held his head in her lap while Trker-Hon walked restlessly back and forth. First aid on humanoids was not one of his talents. He and the old Arkonide had...well, "become friends" might be too utopian from a Terran point of view, but the relationship between the two came as close to friendship as possible.

"I need medical care for the Derengar."

"I apologize," said the holo, nodding kindly before it faded out.

"Is he still breathing?" the lizard asked, hissing. Trker-Hon's hands opened and closed around empty air.

Michalovna placed her ear on the Arkonide's chest. "Yes," she whispered. "But I don't know for how long. He's getting weaker."

Trker-Hon cursed. "This disease... Do you think it's also a test?"

She shook her head. "That would mean there's a power somewhere out there that determines our fate. I don't believe in that. And neither do you, right?"

The Topsidan remained silent for a little too long before answering. “No. I am a guardian of the Moral Directive. We shape our own lives.”

His voice became quieter as he spoke, as if the cemented contents of the Moral Directive were losing their validity; as if the foundation of the Topsidian worldview was crumbling in the face of death.

Michalovna smiled; the Wise One suddenly seemed very human to her. “I do sometimes wonder if it wouldn’t be nice to have such an instance of hope, or at least someone to blame,” she confessed.

Trker-Hon raised his hands defensively. “Resist such thoughts! Believe in the eighth sentence: the lie flatters, the truth hurts, so seek pain and gain the sweet fruit of knowledge!”

The opening of the door and the arrival of Ogre-214 interrupted their conversation.

“High Inspector?”

“Get a doctor! Derengar Crest has suffered an attack of weakness.”

The Orgh came closer and leaned forward with interest, the spindly chitinous arms crackling as if electricity were running through them. “His time has come?”

“Get a fucking doctor!” Michalovna yelled as the Arkonide’s breath grew barely perceivable. So weak, so delicate, so...mortal. “You have to help him!”

Ogre-214 straightened up briefly only to collapse again immediately. “He knew he was going to die?”

“He’s sick!”

“Did he pass on his knowledge?”

“What? No, we *will* save him!”

“I’m sorry. I don’t understand it. He is irresponsible.”

“On the contrary! He is one of the most responsible men I have ever met. You don’t understand anything about that. And now you will *get a doctor!*”

Ogre-214 stayed where he was. “He who lives, lives. And whoever dies, dies. No one is worth more than the others. Medicine is irrelevant. Is it contagious?”

She did not answer his question. “Is this what makes your people who they are? Mercilessness? Insensitivity? Lack of empathy before a great man?” She struck the Orgh with one hand, actually wishing in that moment to wield the power the insectoids attributed

to her. The blow certainly hurt her more than the Orgh, but he flinched back. In his compound eyes, however, there was no emotion.

Trker-Hon came up next to her. Although he was a good three heads smaller than the spindly Orgh, he seemed extremely threatening. “He’s contagious?” he asked.

“No! And his time is far from over!” She embraced the old man, completely overwhelmed by the force of the feelings she had toward him, of which she’d had no idea. Crest was like a grandfather and partner. And he was a guiding star on their dangerous journey through time and space. “He must not die!”

Ogre-214 stood motionless. Whether he looked at her or Crest or assessed Trker-Hon, she didn’t know. But he would not help her. He couldn’t do it because it was not a part of his people; she understood that.

“I know where he can find help,” said Ogre-214.

It took her a moment to understand what she had just heard. She raised her head, trying to boost her bossy and proud camouflage. “Then take us there!”

The Orgh raised his four arms in a gesture that resembled a human shrug. “At the moment, it’s impossible. Will he survive another day?”

Trker-Hon hissed softly. Michalovna put a hand on Crest’s forehead, listening to his breath. He sounded calmer than before, and a bit stronger. The Arkonide had fallen asleep.

“I hope so.”

“If he experiences the morning, I will try to help him,” Ogre-214 said in his longest sentence to date, leaving without another word.

8.

Tatiana Michalovna
Kedhassan
Day three, morning

"I'm sorry I caused us such inconvenience," Crest whispered, gently stroking Michalovna's hand. "I thank the star gods for companions as generous as the two of you."

The old man had slept for ten hours, and the spirits seemed to have returned to him. He still seemed weak and insecure, but he could walk and move, even if his pain was evident. The Terran woman did not need to use her telepathic powers.

"You have to eat and drink!" she instructed, pushing something at him that looked like a cup of black tea and a red fried egg.

Crest carefully tried the foreign foods, found them acceptable, and ate slowly. Trker-Hon and Michalovna also had a bite to eat. They were silent about the strange voice of thought she had experienced like a kind of echo in Crest the previous day. Michalovna had once tried to address this phenomenon, but the Arkonide had avoided her at the time. As a result, she had decided to leave it alone for now.

Shortly thereafter, Gal-Enn appeared. He stopped in the front doorway of their living quarters as if he needed an invitation to further enter their private area. This had probably always been the case when a commission visited the planet.

"We offer a...zzzhh...sorry for the inability to save time when it comes to commissioning the World-Splitter."

Gal-Enn's thoughts were in turmoil, much more than the day before. Michalovna felt that clearly, but she could not identify the cause. And she was not allowed to ask because that would not have suited her role.

"I don't think apologies are enough," she said instead.

"I offer you an opportunity to visit a...zzzhhh...another project whose inspection of the positivity of our assessment on the part of

the Empire allows for conduciveness." He waved one hand. "A project of interest to the...zzhhh...honorable commission, yes?"

She hesitated. She would rather have waited for the help promised by Ogre-214; after all, she had to take care of Crest. What would Rhodan say if he learned that the wise Arkonide who was supposed to help shape the future of humanity had died in the past?

Crest took the decision away from her. He rose with a force that she would no longer have thought he had, and his voice vibrated with energy. "Show us your project, Gal-Enn!"

This time, ten gliders equipped with heavy radiation weapons buzzed around the black velvet cushion as they left the Shining City and flew into the barren expanse of Kedhassan. Compared to their security escort on the previous day, this was an extraordinary increase. What did they need so much security for?

Gal-Enn did not tell them. His face remained as indistinguishable as ever. Trker-Hon tried to get information from Ogre-214, but he seemed unwilling to share his knowledge with them. Perhaps he was also unaware of this second project, which was apparently unknown to the Great Empire.

In turn, he developed an amazing curiosity about Crest's condition. But Trker-Hon remained tight-lipped when faced with his questions. This helpfulness did not fit at all with the behavior of the Orgh.

Crest, for his part, had enough to do with maintaining the appearance of energy. He would not show any weakness in front of the insectoids, no matter how sick he felt, and tried not to let anyone get close to him.

Michalovna was undecided as to what to do. As high commissioner, she was not expected to be physically active but to give judgments as if she were awarding titles to particularly valuable wines. However, she didn't know how strong her reactions had to be to appear credible. All she had was her telepathic sense, which helped her assess the mood of the Orgh. She strolled through the ranks of the locals who were on board as if to inspect them. Something was completely wrong; she felt it.

In concentrating, she squinted her eyes into narrow slits and reached out with her mental powers, carefully so as not to frighten or warn the telepathically inclined Orgh. She meanwhile assumed that the antennae on the strangers' heads were an indispensable

instrument of their mental powers. In any case, this would explain why they could not have active telepathic communication with her—she lacked the right antenna.

Michalovna could only perceive thoughts and not actively send them. However, she did not need a specific organ, perhaps because she was a mutant, an exception among the Terrans. In the case of the Orgh, on the other hand, nature had set it up in such a way that there was a reliable, arbitrarily reproducible organ for the ability of active and passive telepathy. But she wasn't a biologist or even an expert on foreign peoples; she was simply looking for a justification that she could consider valid enough.

It was difficult to tell the Orgh apart. The teardrop-shaped heads with four expressionless eyes all looked alike. The chitinous body allowed for hardly any variations in mass, so there were no thick or thin Orgh; they all resembled each other as if they had sprung from the same mold. At most, on the basis of the brown scale patterns, she saw some distinguishing features upon careful observation, but these patterns were so complex and similar that she soon no longer felt inclined to continue studying them.

Otherwise, uniformity was very important to the Orgh, especially in regard to their clothing: all wore one or more identical white plastic belts that held containers in which they stored tools, energy magazines, or other miscellanea. The soldiers also wore crossed straps on the upper thirds of their bodies to hold their firearms. Even the firearms of the same series all looked identical—nowhere were there individual applications or markings. Everything was frighteningly clean, almost sterile.

Perhaps the Orgh did not value individuality. Or, and she thought this was more likely, they perceived them through smells or thoughts; perhaps they did not need something as profane as outward appearances, unlike humans. Michalovna knew no military unit of humans in which there were no individual signs for individual members.

She crossed her hands behind her back and walked briskly, determined to find out what was wrong. But she uncovered no sign of danger, nothing unusual. No Orgh behaved particularly conspicuously—thanks to their four complex eyes, they were able to keep an eye on everything without having to move their heads. And their thoughts...remained painful. Again and again she retreated from those thoughts because she feared the sharp pain.

She tried to hide the constant elements of collisions and hierarchies that confused her and instead penetrate into their actual, inner thoughts. It seemed to her as if she were pushing veils aside, always anxious, hoping that what lurked behind it did not notice. But all she came across were more veils, as if primary, secondary, tertiary, and many other ‘collisions’ defined every fiber of the Orghs’ being. She desperately needed a key or code that would make her understand what it was all about. Only then would she be able to truly access the strangers’ thoughts, if that was possible at all.

Without tangible results, yet soaked in sweat, she gave up her exploration attempts for the time being. The day would be long enough, and perhaps a very old-fashioned form of observation would be more fruitful than mind reading.

Shaftgal-Cull stood in a row with his soldiers and observed the three strangers. It was difficult for him to distinguish them from each other. This was due to the structure of his eyes, which had many advantages for the life of the Orgh, but also caused problems when in contact with completely foreign peoples such as Arkonides.

The Orgh’s four holoptic eyes were approximately hemispherical, covering over seventy percent of the head capsule and composed of a large number of polygonal ommatidia. There were about ten thousand per eye, but this could vary depending on the brood of the queen, who could specifically produce her offspring within certain parameters. There were hunting broods that had almost three times the number of single eyes.

Such a high number of eyes might sound like a particular advantage to an outsider, but that was not the case. Complex eyes had a significantly weaker performance in spatial representation than, for example, the eye configurations common among other species. A lens eye, as the Arkonides had, concentrated incident light on a few sensory cells and enabled an enormously high resolution.

In the compound eyes of the Orgh, the light emitted from an object point often only hit one of the tiny lens surfaces, and from there a sensory cell. As a result, the image of the world became very flat—a disadvantage that was compensated for by two other properties of the eyes: on the one hand, the Orgh saw everything in the same sharpness, while lens eyes only perceived the center of the

image precisely; on the other hand, they were able to capture movements in incredible detail. Where Arkonides processed about sixty images per second and combined them into motion sequences, the performance of Orgh eyes was three times as high. The high temporal resolution caused them to see more sharply the more movement there was. At least, that's what the scientists claimed.

The most interesting person for Shaftgal-Cull at the moment was Tiara da Efelith, the High Inspector. She moved and so he could perceive her well. The other two, the Derengar, remained still and were harder to see. He couldn't get a real picture of them. The movements of Efelith betrayed her insecurity. Why was that? Shaftgal-Cull didn't want to rush, but there was too much at stake. But his distrust was increasing...

This time, they landed near a lonely, cuboid, concrete structure that looked like nothing special. There were no windows, only a wide, rectangular door and numerous items located on the other wall of the barracks.

"What is this place?" asked Michalovna harshly. "You didn't take us all the way here to show us this? It has nothing to do with the World-Splitter and the Shining City!"

"The making of this claim never took place," Gal-Enn said in his awkward language. "The significance of this place will soon be clear. Come! And exercise caution."

"I'm very curious to know how a shed will help the Great Empire to defeat the Methanes."

"Weapons found on a small scale are just as capable of unleashing deadly energy as large weapons," Gal-Enn said.

"Everything will be fine," Ogre-214 added ambiguously, pointing to the entrance with all four arms.

The cool wind carried a strange smell. Its scent burned like ammonia and scratched the lungs like wet fur. *Like a farm,* Michalovna thought and followed the Orgh.

Passing through the dark opening, she found herself in a brightly lit room. Shrill, incomprehensible voices sounded around them; apparently, an energy field that swallowed light and sound but was permeable to material bodies surrounded the entrance.

The mutant struggled to suppress a horrified cry. Inside the inconspicuous building, four long rows of cages stretched out, each surrounded by solid steel rods and force fields—or whatever the Orgh used—each about a meter deep, one and a half meters high,

and just as wide. And in each of them squatted, stood, or lay...an Ilt.

Ilts like Gucky. Hundreds of begging, threatening, moaning, or screaming Ilts, their eyes fixated on those entering.

"What is all this?" she asked in as casual a tone as possible. "Are you offering the Empire barbaric fur farming?"

The creatures in the cages, about one meter tall, were clearly Ilts. The flattened beaver tails, the pear-shaped bodies covered with long reddish-brown fur, two stocky, short legs, and two slender arms that ended in five-fingered hands; the mouselike head with the almost perfectly circular ears, the large brown dachshund eyes, and the single incisor at the front of the muzzle. At first glance, they may have looked like animals, and even more so in the cages. But if Gucky was a typical representative of his people, they were intelligent creatures. Very cute creatures, if you imagined them in good condition. And equipped with impressive psychic powers.

"Your view is that of an organic...zzzhhh...weapons system," Gal-Enn said. He seemed proud at that moment. "Matrim-306 is responsible for the demonstration of detailed knowledge."

He waved in an Orgh who was running water into a gully in the back of the barracks that stretched across the front of all the cages.

Just as Matrim-306 was about to come over, the gutter bent upward at a blunt angle, hitting him in the middle segment of his body. The Orgh made a brief statement of pain, but Michalovna believed that his explosive thoughts hammering her were more like surprise and anger than real pain.

It wasn't an accident! she thought. *I recognize telekinesis when I see it! Those Ilts are psychic, just like Gucky. But apparently not quite as strong; otherwise, they would not allow themselves to be treated like this! We must help them!*

Matrim-306 pulled a green lever embedded in the wall, and less than a second later, the Ilts in the entire cage row squeaked in pain, except for three: two hovered a hand's width above the ground, and one stood upright in the middle of his cage, directing a poisonous, evil eye at the Orgh. He hissed something that was hard to understand, but it didn't sound friendly.

If what we hear is a real language, the translator will soon decipher it and we can communicate. In any case, it is not Arkonide.

She thought of the tiny positronics that Julio had developed, one of which was hidden somewhere in her body, coupled with her nervous system. These "translators" listened to what their wearer

heard and tried to learn from them. They automatically intervened if the speaker wanted to make themselves understood or if they heard something incomprehensible. For the wearer, it was as if they were hearing words in a language familiar to them, and for others, the desired sounds came from the wearer's mouth.

How this worked, exactly, the telepath didn't understand. She became dizzy when she thought about the chain reaction this could cause. Suppose she said something to Crest in Russian, the translator took her voice and let her shape the Arkonide words instead of the Russian ones. For Trker-Hon, on the other hand, who was also listening, his own translator simulated her speaking Topsidian, and when he then spoke, it sounded either Arkonide or Russian, depending on the addressee, but both she and Crest only heard words in their native language...

"They're electrocuting the bottom of the cages," whispered Crest, who had stepped up next to her.

Trker-Hon stopped in the entrance as if he had been blinded. The old Topsidan probably wanted to be careful and keep an eye out for a quick escape.

By first putting one leg in front of the other two and then vice versa, Matrim-306 came closer. The Orgh wore a kind of headband attached to its head antenna and mandibles with cables. When he spoke, his voice was clearly understood, but it sounded artificial.

"I submit mine to the commission..." He fell silent and seemed to listen, irritated, inside himself. "My Shaft was targeted. We supervise research facilities and maintain records. You are looking at the great experiment devised by Gal-Enn."

The Orgh tried something like a bow, but his physique was not designed for it, so it carried out a simple, yet unnatural movement.

"As you can see, it is a combined breeding and research station of the Kedhassan-based half-animal species. We expect much from it."

"The Ilts were already living here when you arrived?" asked Crest.

"They existed, yes. We do not believe that they are identical with the indigenous people of Kedhassan. Certainly they are not the builders of the Shining City. My preferred hypothesis...you could say: descendants of pets, yes. We had to literally drive them out of the city before we could settle them."

Matrim-306 patted his chest. "We were in the process of

eradicating them because they behaved like pests. However, we did not succeed because they have amazing abilities. Not all the same and certainly not to the same extent, especially telepathy, mind-reading, and telekinesis, movement of matter without physical touch, as well as teleportation, the conscious zero-temporal spatial displacement of one's own body—psychic abilities, therefore, which can be specifically trained and bred, yes."

"Psychic? Like your telepathic abilities?"

"Our ability is intraspecies while real psychic abilities should at least be interspecies. Especially if you want to use them as a weapon."

"Weapon?" echoed Michalovna.

"Sure. Telekinesis is unbeatable for surgical actions; teleportation allows penetration into otherwise inaccessible areas. The possible applications are..."

Michalovna's thoughts were racing. *They're breeding living weapons and using the Ilts! We must stop this. But there are only three of us with no weapons...what can we do without losing credibility as the commission?*

Crest stepped closer to one of the cages. "How far have your experiments progressed?"

"Through targeted selection, we have already made considerable progress," Matrim-306 announced.

"Is that so?" Michalovna replied. "You are just trying to obscure your tardiness with regard to the World-Splitter. This project consumes useless resources! Break it off and release those animals!"

"Zzzhhh...no, High Inspector," Gal-Enn refused. He didn't sound submissive anymore. "A demonstration will elevate expediency to proof." He gesticulated violently and at the same time gave a mental command, she noted. Immediately, there was movement among the Orgh.

"You just want to distract me with another simulation," she insisted. "I will mention the waste of valuable resources in my report."

"We will prove you wrong. It is not at all our intention to distract you," Matrim-306 assured her. "Come, we will go outside, as the preparations take time. Do you have a special request? We can show you different para-fighters."

"Do the Ilts have only one psychic ability each or do they have multiple abilities?" asked Crest, while Michalovna, trembling with

anger and helplessness, said nothing.

"We are working on multi-fighters but have never been able to keep the genetic line stable," confessed the Orgh. "May I suggest setting a telekinetic against a teleporter?"

"Why this pairing?"

Matrim-306 seemed caught. "Well...these two talents are strongly represented in the pool of the Ilts."

"You mean teleporters and telekinetics are more expendable than others?" asked Crest.

"Their loss does not mean a primary collision of the project...yet."

"The para-fighters are not ready for series production?" Michalovna's voice slammed like a whip in between. Maybe they still had a chance to save the Ilts. "I warn you!"

"They are...but discipline problems are not uncommon, are they? We are currently experimenting with some interesting approaches to keep the objects cooperative."

The insectoid pointed to some Orgh anesthetizing an Ilt, injecting it with something. "Object 751 from breeding line 11 has just been injected with microminiaturized combination explosive capsules, which ignite automatically according to programming as soon as a framework condition is violated."

"And what is it?"

"First of all: if the object is more than a kilometer away from the appropriate transmitter. 751 is an excellent teleporter, and we can't afford to lose it to carelessness. If protective screens fail."

The Orgh were not exactly tender with the unconscious Ilt. Michalovna tried to focus on Matrim-306. "And with telekinetics or those with other abilities?"

"These detonators are programmable in a customizable way. All viewers of the test runs receive a mini transmitter that is coupled with their vital signs. Serious changes in the vital signs lead to the same result in the Ilts as a teleport jump that goes too far, you understand? Boom!"

The Orgh had built a kind of arena about five hundred meters from the barracks: a pit of oval base and slightly fortified, about eight meters high, which was completely vaulted by a force field. Outside the force field hovered several observer lodges in which the Orgh and their visitors sat.

Simple robots managed to get two unconscious Ilts onto

antigravity beds. The numbers “751/11” and “8/16” were applied to their fur in bright colors.

“Breeding line sixteen has produced the best telekinetic results so far—better even than five and six,” Matrim-306 explained. “Eight is one of the weaker telekinetics of all sixteen that have been operational so far. She will have problems against 751. Of course, we record the arena battles for training purposes.”

Gal-Enn made a sound that seemed to rise from his body, a satisfied, gurgling sound. “My expectation is, based on experience, enthusiasm. Arkon will see the need.”

It didn’t take long for the two Ilts to wake up. They sat up, shook their fur, and stared at each other.

“Nii’shi lira pakular?”

“Guu-she ke firi pakular!”

“Fight!” thundered a drastically amplified voice through the arena.

“Juklar Pakular pa!” cried Eight.

751 laughed brightly. “Pakular pa!”

“See?” asked Matrim-306. “Obedience is not yet sufficiently genetically implemented. I’m going to give them a little stimulus now.”

Trker-Hon leaned over. “What do you mean?”

The Orgh made a cracking sound. “Do you see the collars under the fur? I can use it to trigger an impulse that acts like an EMP on select areas of the Ilt brain. Simply put, I perform a pain overload that temporarily erases the identity of the Ilt and makes it aggressive. That is completely sufficient for our purposes.”

The Topsidan didn’t show what he thought of that. “I understand,” he said slowly. The scales on his neck stood up, and one hand reached for Michalovna to hold her in her seat.

“We’re getting started.” Matrim-306 took out a small device and pointed it at the two Ilts.

The Ilts seemed to have been replaced from one moment to the next. They looked at each other and growled. Then, 751 surprisingly teleported directly behind eight and tried to wrap both hands around her neck. Eight reacted in a flash and dove away under the movement so that the blow only grazed her. She whirled around, her hands spread into claws, but by then, 751 was gone. He reappeared a few meters away and reached for an iron bar lying on

the ground.

Eight stretched out his arms, and the iron bar trembled slightly in 751's hand, but did not move. The telekinetic forces of Eight were apparently not as strong as the Orgh would have liked. Eight let his arms sink in frustration, preparing for a new attack. The teleporter could appear anywhere and strike without warning. His appearance made a slight noise, but when he was fast, Eight had no time to dodge the attack.

"Pakular shi ji!" shrieked in 751, disappearing and reappearing far behind eight. He then swirled around, prepared for an attack, but then he disappeared, appeared, disappeared, appeared until Eight was turning in a circle. She looked around to see if there was anything she could use as a weapon, but she always had to pay attention to her opponent.

Poor girl, Michalovna thought. Not much longer and she would be too exhausted to react quickly enough when 751 actually attacked. The teleporter seemed to have either greater strength reserves or better training. But the breaks between his jumps became longer and longer.

Again, he teleported, and when he rematerialized this time, Eight attacked. Michalovna only noticed how Eight's face darkened with concentration. As if storm clouds were gathering.

She will kill him, she thought. *But how?*

751 suddenly gasped, then roared. Was she squeezing his trachea with her telekinetic powers? No. She was too weak for that; the trachea was tough. But what was it, then?

"It's the tongue," Matrim-306 said next to her, as if reading her mind. "She sticks her own tongue into his throat until he suffocates. Very efficient, silent, and bloodless. If 751 hadn't played around, he would have had enough strength to teleport away and loosen her grip."

Michalovna hoped that the Orgh could not see the bewilderment on her face. She was unable to hide her feelings. "Stop the fight. We've seen enough."

This is not a game, not a competition. Whoever loses, dies. But she also realized that this behavior fit the Orgh's worldview.

"I can't do that," Matrim-306 claimed.

751 chirped something in the language of the Ilts, and then he died. This time, for the first time, her translator—and apparently Crest's and Trker-Hon's as well—translated the sounds, going by

their reactions.

"I think that's enough," she said, rising abruptly. Next to her, Crest trembled. No, the World-Splitter was by no means the only terrible thing on this world. She wished Kedhassan, with all its gruesome discoveries, would die, leaving no survivors.

How could the Orgh turn these thinking, sentient beings into weapons?

"Your project might please the Empire...provided you manage to teach them unconditional obedience. We only need super soldiers if we can be sure that they will not harm us."

"That's how it will be," Matrim-306 assured her. "We serve the Great Empire!"

"You show satisfaction?" asked Gal-Enn who did not seem to be bothered by the outcome of the fight. *What dies, dies, and what lives, lives,* Michalovna thought. Gal-Enn was a typical Orgh, that much was certain.

"Bring us back. We'll talk about it later!" she ordered, hoping that she would eventually forget about the Ilts' fight. *When and where and how should I have intervened to prevent this? No...we failed in our audit. What do we want with immortality when we can't even give others their normal life span?*

The last words of 751 went through her head. They had revealed that the Ilt had regained his identity at the moment of his death: *"I forgive you."*

"It's a monstrosity," said Trker-Hon. "This is a mockery of the Third Movement. Respect life! Get it where you can. Only extinguish it where it is unavoidable. We must not allow..."

"We won't either!" promised Michalovna. *I forgive you...* She forced the memory away, but the last look of the dying Ilt wouldn't let her go. Could she allow an entire people to be manipulated this way? Manipulated to kill and die? "We have to stop what's happening here."

"Wait!" cried Crest. "I share your views and values, but despite this, we aren't any closer to understanding the impact of our activities in the past."

"Sometimes you have to risk something," Trker-Hon stated. The old Topsidan seemed much more affected now than by the simulation of the World-Splitter.

"Forgive my intrusion." Suddenly, Ogre-214 was standing at the

door. “I have help for you. I’ll guide you there tonight. Until then, rest!”

“Wait! Who is it? You have to tell us more!” Michalovna demanded.

“You wait. That’s the best way to do it.” And with those words, Ogre-214 left the room again.

9.

Julian Tifflor
Ferron Freighter
October 7, 2036

"What could be better than enjoying the light of the stars?"

Julian Tifflor was surrounded by black nothingness, which distant stars rested on like diamonds. He spread his arms and took a deep breath, and although it was only the sterile-tasting air from his space suit, it seemed quite different to him. Was that eternity? Was that what Ernst Ellert and Timothy Harnahan were allowed to feel?

"Just be careful," Mildred warned him.

He grinned boyishly. "What are you more afraid of? The stars, me, or the Fantan?"

Mildred smiled. "I'm not really afraid. Not of the Fantan."

"I am. I have no desire to be their Besun."

"Could it be worse than being William's son?" she teased him.

He contorted his face. "It's not so bad; it's just rather exhausting. He's so...large. So infallible."

The two had made themselves comfortable in a depression in the fuselage of the *Radessora,* the huge old ore transporter of the Ferrons, as comfortable as was possible in closed space suits. The *Radessora* belonged to the Takmir-Warani mining company, headquartered on Ferrol.

It was not difficult for people to buy the "space whale," as Julian jokingly called the ship. It had already defied the dangers of space for many years—small asteroids had scratched and dented its shell, the engine lines were constantly on the verge of burning out, and the reactor inside the colossus would no longer have withstood any technical testing. The rotational segments that generated the onboard gravity had completely failed.

A repair and modernization of the ship would have taken months and cost at least as much as a new one. As bait for the Fantan, it was perfectly suited precisely because of its poor

condition. Terran specialists had once again lent a hand for safety, and so the ore transporter now drifted, airless and rigid, in a silent trudge through the outskirts of the Vega system.

Thanks to the special soles of their space suits, Julian Tifflor and Mildred Orsons stayed attached to the scarred hull and were not affected by the movements of the ship. They stood motionless in weightlessness and watched the passing splendor of the stars. What had initially sounded like a particularly exciting idea had long since become a tiring assignment: To wait together in the face of infinity for plundering Fantan. To ensure that Terra grabbed at least a single Fantan in case the accompanying ship escaped the *Tosoma*. To be careful that they were not made Besun and abducted themselves. To leave their domestic star system and view far-off stars.

"Wanderlust is starache, and all the stars go out when I lose your closeness..." Julian sang a line from a popular song. "More than a million light years from here, the star path to your door is waiting!" He and Mildred had reconciled to this text for the first time after one of their outbursts of rage. He looked at her, at her narrow, beautiful face with those dark eyes. Her black hair stuck under the chunky space helmet that looked like an ebony frame around her uniform features. How could a man not fall in love with her?

Mildred returned his gaze. Could she guess his thoughts? Was she also thinking of a gentle touch, caresses, even kissing? He swallowed heavily as his body stirred at these memories. Being in a space suit in the deadly, airless cold of space was one of the safest ways to nip any sense of intimacy in the bud.

"Tiff," she said with that inimitable dimpled smile. "I hope you aren't thinking about what I think you're thinking about."

"I'm not," he replied. Hopefully, she couldn't see him blushing. "I was just thinking that maybe we're sitting here for nothing. What if the Fantan don't take the bait?"

She put a thickly padded arm around him. It felt uncomfortable, perhaps much like one imagined a ballet with sumo wrestlers.

"They will come. The question is when. Our friends on Earth desperately need help."

He nodded. "Ideally, *Tosoma* will find the Fantan before we have to do anything."

"I thought you liked to play the hero for me?" she teased him.

Her voice crackled in the helmet reception.

"Timothy played the hero," he whispered.

She was silent; only the sound of her breath as it suddenly went out and then, violently, started again. "Not..."

He brushed her hand off her shoulder and turned away from her. "I'm not sad." He tried to explain to her what was going on inside him. "I'm...envious."

Mildred stared at him in disbelief.

"What a feeling that must be, to roam endlessly through space. What Timothy will experience..."

"Are you sure he's still alive?"

How could she ask that? Of course Timothy Harnahan was still alive. He had risen in the mysterious spherical creature Harno and disappeared with him.

"We'll see Timothy again," Julian claimed. "Just think of Ernst Ellert! He was considered dead and reappeared."

"I think you're clinging to a fixed idea. Harno is a sensationalist. I don't automatically believe everything he says. Who knows what his agenda is?"

"He has no agenda; he's a friend," Julian disagreed.

"Oh yeah? And how do you know that? Because he says so? Wake up, Tiff!"

He saw the tracking device they had mounted suddenly light up. "Wait a minute!" He whispered automatically, even though it was completely pointless. "I think something is coming."

Mildred let herself slide deeper into the hollow. She seemed alert and cautious. "October 7, 2036, 16:00 hours, Terrania time. The Fantan are coming."

"Why aren't they coming closer?" murmured Julian.

Mildred grimaced. "I'll tell you, they aren't stupid. They've long since understood that they're dealing with a Topsidian hyper-radio transmitter on a Ferron ship. You don't have to be a genius to sense a trap in it."

"I'd rather rely on their curiosity than their stupidity."

She laughed. "Curiosity?"

"The Fantan have at least been curious enough—regardless of contracts or agreements—to drift around the Vega system, probably because they're hoping for Besun. We've had twelve sightings in the last three weeks."

Sluggishly, the *Radessora* continued to rotate, so that suddenly

Vega's star rose huge and blue-white behind the metal hull.

Beautiful, Julian thought at that moment. Yes, no matter what else was going to happen, just for that moment when the cosmos was exhaling all its radiant splendor deeply and only for him and Mildred, the trip was worth it. He grabbed her hand and squeezed it. It could stay this way forever...

"They're coming!" she whispered excitedly, pointing into space, where they knew the Fantan's spindle ship was coming from.

A flounder-shaped dinghy approached in rapid flight and docked at the bow of the *Radessora*. To the unbiased eye, the individual maneuvers of the matte-painted dinghy were difficult to observe against the light-speckled black background, and where Vega flared, it swallowed every shadow.

"Switch to internal monitors!" Julian ordered. "We have to watch what they do."

"Shouldn't Pounder already be on his way to capture the Fantan's ship?" she asked as she followed his command.

"I suppose he wanted to wait until the Fantan were on board to delay any of their reactions to the *Tosoma*'s approach."

"Sounds reasonable," she admitted, "but a scary thought just occurred to me. Us alone against a lot of Fantan..."

He looked at the image of the air lock chamber. "Two," he said. "There are only two Fantan."

Her mouth formed a silent "Oh."

On the monitor, they saw two approximately human-sized, cylindrical creatures as they worked their way through the corridors of the *Radessora*. *Fantan...*

The two aliens could be distinguished from each other right away: one had six extremities completely covered by a tattoo, while the other had only four appendages without any decoration. Otherwise, they looked very similar to each other. The finely scaled cylinders with the rounded corners and the meaningless dark openings in the upper half of the body, in which sensory organs were hidden, had no special characteristics.

Were the number of limbs and tattoos sexual characteristics? Were Fantan multisex at all? Or were they representatives of two different subgroups, such as Central Europeans and Asians? Or was the six-limbed one a mutant, or the four-limbed one crippled by an accident?

The Fantan proceeded cautiously but routinely. They headed

straight toward the bridge, moving with great skill through the airless, weightless rooms. They paid no attention to the cameras on the ceiling, probably assuming they were dead and the ship was empty.

They soon reached the bridge. One of the pair—the six-limbed one with the tattoos—immediately devoted himself to the hyper transmitter, which he had quickly recognized was foreign to the ship. Topsidian design and Ferron aesthetics were so far apart that there could be no doubt about it.

The other one staggered frantically to the ship's controls and inspected the surfaces and displays. Carefully, he typed at various consoles, leaning over the instruments.

"Now would be great timing for the *Tosoma* to come," Mildred said. "The Fantan will figure out the trap soon enough."

Julian agreed with her inwardly, but he said nothing; he was too fascinated by the strangers and their way of exploring the ship. Would they find anything of value? He had no idea what criteria the Fantan used to decide this.

The tattooed one came to his companion at the control instruments. They spoke briefly and incomprehensibly to each other, then he stretched out an arm and activated the drive reactors as a test. Signal lights came on.

Something was stirring in the hull of the *Radessora*; Julian could feel the vibrations in the ground. Far beyond their location, three or four engine nozzles were activated one after the other. Seven more had been deactivated by the Terran technicians. Two others to the side of the young humans, on the other hand, would turn on again.

At least, that's what they were supposed to do. But they reacted completely differently. At first, Julian only noticed that the floor was vibrating more.

Strange, he thought.

Then the outer engine started with a weak reddish flame. Just as Julian was about to breathe a sigh of relief, it happened: the drive nozzle exploded in a huge white-yellow fireball only fifty meters away from them...

10.

Tatiana Michalovna
Kedhassan
Day three, evening

Ogre-214 kept his word. When the sun was gone and the colorful bands of light brightened the darkness of the night, he picked up his three masters.

"Follow me! We go on foot."

"Is it very far?" asked Crest, who again looked very strained.

"Follow me!" the Orgh simply repeated, turning around and leaving.

For better or worse, they followed him. Could this be a test or a trap? Or were they just wasting valuable time? If the real commission was on time—and so far nothing indicated the contrary—they would soon have other Arkonides to deal with.

They left the building that the Orgh had placed in the middle of the Shining City by way of an elevator system consisting of glass cabins that ran along the flanks of the pyramid. As they passed the next building, Michalovna noticed how roughly the Orgh had erected their sleeping pyramid. In a generously dimensioned circle around the square base, the floor had been sprayed with a white mass.

In terms of color, it hardly differed from the rest of the floor covering during the day, but at night you could see the difference: while everywhere else reflected the glow of the towers and even the road surface looked alive in a strange way, as if sparks wandered through and over the alabaster-colored plastic, the entire affected area seemed dead.

They walked quickly, but Michalovna could not shake her suspicion that Ogre-214 was still too slow. After walking silently for perhaps a quarter of an hour, she decided to start a conversation.

"These skylights are very impressive."

Ogre-214 did not respond. She understood that the Orgh had

perhaps not understood her statement as an attempt at communication, but only as a statement.

"What are those lights up there in the sky?" She pointed upward.

"Many call them ghosts," Ogre-214 replied but made no effort to stop. "They come at night. It is not clarified what they are and how they are created. It is assumed that these are secondary effects of the plants in the city."

"Ah," Michalovna said and hurried to his right side. She placed her left hand on his lower arm. She half expected him to push her away, remove her hand or at least wince, but he just let it happen. There was no threat from his thoughts either. At the moment, only five-pronged questions seemed to go through his head.

"Why are you doing this? Why are you helping us? It violates the principles of your people."

Now he stopped, so suddenly that Crest and Trker-Hon would have run into him if he hadn't stopped them with two of his arms.

"You want help?" His two-meter-high figure fluctuated as if he were undecided about what was expected of him. "I'm looking for help."

Quaternary gain might be possible through a quintal connection, but Arkonides don't understand that, not even these three, he thought sadly. His thoughts flowed clearly into Michalovna's consciousness, even if she still did not understand everything.

All right. She probably had only one possibility. She had to reveal her talent. "Try it. Maybe we'll understand after all."

Ogre-214 stopped abruptly. "What do you mean?"

"You know what I mean." She hoped that he understood. Perhaps he could read her mind if she thought intensely enough. It would be an attempt to short-circuit their two abilities, so to speak.

I...want...you...understand! She thought, as focused and clearly as she could.

He did not react. "What do you mean?" he repeated.

Listen to me!

His thoughts flew up and scattered like a swarm of sparrows, scared by sudden movement. And then she felt something snap into place, as if tongue and groove were intertwined. From one heartbeat to the other, she understood his voice of thought clearly and loudly. *It worked!*

What...

It's me. You know me as High Inspector Tiara da Efelith. Let's just say that I have similar abilities to the Orgh.

Ogre-214 grabbed her with his remaining three arms and pulled her up. It happened so quickly that she didn't have time to fight back. He relentlessly pressed her to himself and tilted his head toward her with clacking mandibles. Suddenly, fear gripped her.

Be careful not to harm me!

Oh. No. Forgive me. I... He let go of her abruptly, pushing her away.

The mental connection gave a discordant non-sound like shattering piano strings, and tore. Trker-Hon grabbed and prevented Michalovna from falling. He hissed, ducked, ready to attack, and pushed himself protectively in front of her.

Ogre-214 made the two upper thirds of his body circle and shifted his weight alternately to his three legs.

Nobody would believe me. You... You are different. I knew it. But...

Slowly, he became smaller. Michalovna needed a few breaths before she realized why. His legs grew shorter, like telescopic poles being pulled in. The Orgh were an amazing species!

When the antenna tip of his head was just at eye level, the physical change ended. Ogre-214 had made himself smaller for her. If she suspected correctly, he wanted to submit to her or make it clear to her that he was harmless and she had nothing to fear. She stretched out her right hand to him.

It took some anxious heartbeats until he in turn grabbed it with his upper right hand. The chitin felt strangely warm and smooth and at the same time rough and cold. He gently placed her hand on his head antenna. Almost immediately, their connection returned.

She felt her way forward with her telepathy, alert and ready to flee. She could not afford to trust him completely until she understood how his kind thought.

You are a strange people, thought Ogre-214. *Your behavior is difficult for us to understand; it follows no pattern.*

Nor do I see any pattern in your people. I only see how pitiless you Orgh are.

Ogre-214 made her feel a touch of anger, immediately followed by resignation. *You are the pitiless.*

Explain it to us!

There are different levels of purpose of existence. Primarius is

concerned with the survival of one's own people. On the three subsequent levels are the security, prosperity, and fame of the direct reference groups, and only then, quintarius, does personal well-being follow. And we align our actions strictly with these target levels. Those who are sick must not affect their people. They must pass on their knowledge; they must not burden others even more than through their own failure. This is true pity. What you're doing is…waste. Don't you understand that?

Gradually, Michalovna understood how the Orgh thought. If the Arkonides did indeed threaten their queen, the primary goal, the preservation of their species, was constantly in danger, and they would subordinate everything to the goal of escaping from the situation. That's why they had restored the World-Splitter; that's why they bred the para-fighters. By proving their worth and loyalty to the Arkonides, they were counteracting the downfall of their own people.

I…understand. But I don't share your worldview. For us, every life is precious. We don't want to sacrifice it.

Do you prefer to sacrifice yourself? Ogre-214 did not understand. Maybe he couldn't, at least not immediately. For the Orgh, all children of the same queen, an illness probably immediately meant a plague because they were so similar to each other. Such a plague could probably eradicate an entire Shaft in a very short time.

We are different from the Orgh.

All life is one.

The Orgh's thought was so strong and sudden and at odds with his overall attitude that Michalovna didn't know what to say for a moment.

If I can avert danger from my people, I will do so, as every Orgh would, Ogre-214 argued. *We Orgh are committed to the whole. The Arkonides claim the same of themselves. I have already served several commissions; all believed they would serve the Empire entirely. But that was not the truth. They have served themselves or their gender or their planet. They put each level before the most important.*

"Why do you help us when we live so wrong?" she asked, noticing that she had spoken her thoughts out loud.

Ogre-214 seemed to understand this as a request to speak aloud as well.

"You are different. I have been watching you. You think of each other. Maybe you are our chance."

You hope that we'll help you?

I know you will. I know you better than you know yourself.

She waited to see if he would say anything else, but his mental voice remained silent. Then he broke away from her and loudly ordered, “Come!”

Crest looked at her, confused, but she just nodded.

“I’ll explain everything to you later. We should trust Ogre-214.”

“All right. For me, it probably doesn’t make much difference.”

She saw the pain behind his eyes and heard the voice of thought, which was so much clearer and stronger than what his dying body allowed him to be.

Do you promise not to leave me here? Bring my remains to Thora. She knows what to do.

Michalovna nodded silently. He knew this was her answer, saw it on his face. How easy it was to read the facial expressions of an Arkonide compared to the leathery, frugal face of a Topsidan or even the rigid heads of the Orgh.

Ogre-214 moved forward as if nothing had happened, growing upward again until he reached his normal size. It only took him a few minutes to stop and struggle with a glowing wall. The rising and falling spark lights danced around his movement as if they were attracted to it, a warm, pleasant pulsation. Then a door opened, revealing a passage that headed diagonally downward.

“In there?” asked Trker-Hon doubtfully. He seemed very suspicious.

“We have to go to the lower town,” Ogre-214 replied calmly. “Only there will you find healing.”

The Topsidan sniffed at the entrance. “Okay. It’s as dry there as everywhere here. So it doesn’t make any difference to me. But if you trick us, you will see that even a one-eyed Topsidan is superior to you.”

“I will not do anything to you,” the Orgh assured them.

They descended into the lower town, which had probably also been created by the original builders. Semicircular tunnels with smooth white walls and lights mounted at a great distance crisscrossed the underground of the Shining City. The height of the tunnels was three meters, with the top meter separated from the rest of the aisle by a transparent, seamlessly smooth disc.

They went much slower than on the surface. Ogre-214 had lowered his body height slightly to make him fit better.

“The energy flows here during the day.” He knocked on the transparent ceiling. “Down here we are safe. Maintenance tunnels, perhaps.”

Trker-Hon looked up. In the ceiling were some smaller holes that led vertically upward. “Interesting. Can you tell us more about that?”

“No. We are here to find help. This is not technology training.” The Orgh stopped. They were at an intersection of five tunnels.

“Why did you stop?” Trker-Hon looked around suspiciously.

“It’s...nothing.”

“You don’t know where to go, do you?”

Is my companion right? Are we lost down here? Michalovna thought to her insectoid leader as she grabbed him by the arm.

It doesn’t matter where we go. We are right. “We are right,” the Orgh repeated his thought loudly and set off, as if direct contact with her had now become uncomfortable for him, as if he felt caught. “That way!”

They followed him, but it was obvious that Ogre-214 was becoming increasingly hectic, like he was looking for something he couldn’t find. The minutes stretched on in the tangle of interchangeable tunnels.

Suddenly, light flared up and bathed them in a merciless brightness that engulfed all shadows.

“Stop!” An unknown voice rang out through the tunnel, probably artificially amplified and distorted. Whoever was speaking didn’t sound like an Orgh, but definitely not like an Arkonide either.

Immediately in front of Michalovna’s feet, a beam of energy hit the ground, leaving behind molten plastic. The heat penetrated through her shoes.

“Don’t shoot!” she shouted, blinded.

At the same moment, a hard blow hit her in the back. She felt something grab her, throw her to the ground, and hold her there. There were no hands, nothing else she had ever touched. It felt like pressure caused by...nothing.

She laboriously turned her head. Next to her, her three companions lay on the ground in an obviously uncomfortable position, but there was no one to be seen. She pinched her eyes and threw out her telepathic ability like a net. She wanted to get an overview of the number of strangers who were nearby. She lacked

the strength and, above all, the time to specifically read thoughts at the moment.

But her psychic feelers took hold...well, not exactly in the void. It was more like they had slipped off or, a better analogy, were pushed away, so fast and hectic that she didn't even have enough time to understand who and how many surrounded her.

"We have done nothing to you!" she shouted, standing up to the invisible grip.

"So-so!" the unknown voice sounded again. "We see it differently. You are all guests of these evil bugs. That says it all!"

Suddenly, a huge, invisible hand grabbed Michalovna's throat and squeezed. She struggled for air. Would she die now?

"And you've also brought such horrible vermin! Once you have them in the house, you can't get rid of them!"

Ogre-214 soared into the air as if pulled by ropes, spun horizontally, and got stuck there as its head antenna slowly knotted. He groaned in pain.

"Who...are you?" she croaked.

"Don't you know?" A black-furred Ilt stepped into the light. On his forearms he wore bars that seemed to be cut from Orgh tanks. He held a rod-shaped beam weapon pointed straight at Ogre-214. "You come with the enemy, so you are the enemy."

Clicking sounds could be heard all around, as if weapons were being readied. Other Ilts approached, all heavily armed, most with reddish-brown fur, but some also in other color varieties—pale brown, chestnut brown, gray-brown. The black Ilt was the only one of its kind. He behaved like the leader of the group, and the others treated him as such.

Strange: just a few hours ago, Michalovna had thought the Ilts were cute little creatures, even during the arena fights. But in this tunnel, not a single one of them seemed cute. On the contrary, a dangerous fire smoldered in their eyes; their fur was lackluster and their fingers clawlike. One was missing a piece of his ear, another only had stumps where his ears should have been, a third wore an eye patch, and another was disfigured by barren, furless scars. And they all stank.

These beings were neglected and ready to kill, and even more: they wanted to kill.

"What are you doing down here?" their leader asked her. "This is our territory!"

The grip around her throat loosened. She seemed to be accepted as the spokesperson of the group. “We have no hostile intentions. We are looking for help.”

“Help?”

A chorus of high giggling sounds answered her.

“Help? We will help you die; then the bugs may understand what to expect if they do not withdraw!” said a voice that Michalovna involuntarily classified as female. It came from a beige Ilt who lacked an incisor and had a jagged scar running across its face. She shuddered at the cold look this Ilt gave her.

I am not “some Ilt!” My name is Morry!

A dissonant thought voice whistled into Michalovna’s head. She could literally hear that it had been broken some time ago and then reassembled in a twisted way.

Think of yourself, beetle friend! Morry continued. She rummaged through Michalovna’s thoughts with such ease...

Get out of my head! Michalovna thought, hoping that all the Ilts would hear her.

Almost immediately, a good half dozen heads turned to Morry. She winced and looked at the human angrily.

“Stupid person! She misunderstood me!” she said shrilly, clutching the beam weapon in her hands more tightly.

“We want to help you!” cried Michalovna, but immediately realized this was the wrong approach.

“You? Help us? You are not looking for help, but someone you can help? Well, we will help you because we can no longer be helped! Does that help?” The Ilt with the eye patch had spoken, and he reaped fierce, approving murmurs.

Morry laughed brightly and fired her gun. A shot hit the glass ceiling but ricocheted and hit the ground right next to Trker-Hon.

The chorus of voices all around became quieter and at the same time more evil, darker.

“Three of you are not Orgh, and three are not Arkonides,” the leader said thoughtfully. “And two of you are neither one nor the other.”

Michalovna was hopeful. Perhaps the opportunity would arise...

But her hopes were in vain. The next words from the black-furred Ilt made it clear to her that they would not have long to live. None of them.

“Caught together, hanged together. Perhaps we will not let the

two strangers suffer as long as the beetle and the whitehead deserve. Get them!"

Michalovna wanted to say something, but the invisible hand closed her mouth. She felt herself being lifted up until the tips of her feet hovered a hand's width above the ground.

Suddenly, a harsh voice said, "Stop! Let them down! No one touches them! To kill them would be a waste."

It was another mousebeaver that had spoken. He obviously did not belong to the troops around them; his fur looked well-groomed and shimmered slightly, and his colors were rich and radiant. He carried no weapon and nothing else that would have made him look more dangerous than the Ilts who faced him with weapons in their hands. On the contrary, he seemed extremely harmless. Almost like Gucky.

But he was probably not harmless, any more than Gucky or any of the Ilts were.

The black Ilt made a clearly threatening gesture to the newcomer. "What you want or don't want, Nurghe, nobody cares. Plofre, maybe."

The newcomer whistled two or three bright tones. Then he said, "Exactly, General Dhargan. And Plofre has determined that knowledge counts more than dead Orgh."

"It's just an Orgh," Dhargan insisted, but he took two steps back. The black Ilt wasn't afraid, was he?

"All the worse and stupider your actions are!" shrilled Nurghe. "Alive, he can benefit us infinitely more."

"It's ours!" shouted Morry, laughing.

Nurghe made a quick move with his hand, and the weapon was ripped out of Morry's grip, flying away in a high arc. "He came to the city of his own free will. I wonder what Plofre will do to you when he hears about it."

Dhargan took another step back. He trembled as if the cold was penetrating his fur. "Okay. They are yours, Nurghe."

"You'll pay for this!" Morry's voice, however, sounded much quieter than before.

Nurghe ignored the threat with the composure that only someone who was absolutely sure of himself could muster. He addressed the three travelers: "What do you want here?"

"We..." Michalovna began.

Crest interrupted her. "Not us. Me. I'm looking for help. I'm

dying.”

11.

Gal-Enn
Kedhassan
Day three, evening

Have your suspicions been confirmed, Shaftgal-Cull?

Gal-Enn, with two companions, stood on a hill outside the city, the same one that had become the meeting place with the Shaftgals the night before. He desperately needed a thought trio. Important actions always required three Orgh, just as one stood on three legs. This has always been the case and would always be so. Only for this purpose could they allow themselves to take a simple point of view instead of always the top four levels, as the number of eyes of his people immutably prescribed.

The matter of the continued existence of their people remained dominant, but each of the three argued on a different of the next three levels and was thus able to focus their thoughts better. The Gal was always responsible for the second level: the physical, mental, and future safety of all Orgh in the Kedhassan system. That was his purpose in life, thereby serving the Queen, serving the people.

The Queen herself had chosen him. He did not know what criteria she had used because there was no one who did not love her and wasn't unconditionally devoted to her; she could have chosen anyone. No Orgh did less than his best in the interest of all. She must have seen something in him that he himself did not recognize. It was unusual for an Aktierier to be elevated to the rank of Gal; Empironen or Exekutale received this honor much more frequently. Even less often, only Reflexonten were promoted.

Until now, Gal-Enn had had the impression that he was up to the task, which consisted mainly of logistical and administrative activities. But the pressure had increased; after all, the Kedhassan Shafts were currently responsible for their entire civilization. Diplomacy and strategy were qualities he had never needed to train

until the Arkonides came.

Shaftgal-Cull had chosen the Gal for the trio because the Exekutale had often proven that he knew how to ask the right questions. He recognized dangers for the five target levels that others could only see later. And he was the one who had dealt with them extensively the previous day and observed them. Within the framework of the trio, the tertiary level fell to him, the question of opportunities and risks for the prosperity of the Orgh, for food, property, and leisure.

I have circumstantial evidence, but nothing concrete. The three strangers behave irritatingly. I can't see that they deliberately want to cause a collision. On the other hand, they demonstrate different behavior from previous commissions.

Finally, Shaftgal-Xarr, the last of his two companions on this fateful night, came from a clutch that had produced many brilliant Empironen. The development of the neural amplifier, which allowed high-ranking Orgh to relay their mental broadcasts over an entire planet at short notice, went back to his Shaft Matrim. The device could still be improved in many details, especially in terms of energy consumption, but the basic development was clearly the merit of Shaftgal-Xarr. Therefore, he embodied the quaternary level, fame through technological or philosophical progress, but also recognition by non-Orgh.

Shaftgal-Xarr had so far been the least concerned of the three about the strangers and first had a report given to him within the trio. After Gal-Enn and Shaftgal-Cull had finished, he sent some vague emotions, but above all, doubts, into the trio's minds.

The situation is delicate. Quaternary, you did the right thing by showing the strangers your warrior project, whether it is the real commission or not. Like any rational being, they will appreciate the tremendous achievement we have accomplished. This will be conducive to our reputation. A collision is only conceivable if our current guests deliberately tried to harm the commission. In order to limit these possibilities, there are two main alternatives: the strict suppression of any flow of information to a possible real commission or the documented liquidation of the current visitors, which serves as an argument.

You advise liquidation? Gal-Enn asked cautiously.

Quaternary, I have to point out that these visitors can possibly be persuaded to inform us about transmitter technology. Do not forget that they used this transport system.

The Orgh thought about it for a moment.

A mistake could mean the last primary collision, Shaftgal-Cull repeated the decisive circumstance. *Ogre-214 has not provided any information of value. The question is as open as it was yesterday.*

Gal-Enn, the leader of the Orgh in the Kedhassan system, looked at the light bands in the sky. They revealed that all the time in this world was finally running out, and he regretted that its destructive beauty only touched him so deeply. But these were subquintary thoughts.

What are you thinking about? Shaftgal-Cull asked. Have you made a decision?

We... Gal-Enn fell silent. His upper pair of arms pointed to the sky. *You see!*

A ball of white-gold fire, coming from the top of the sky, raced toward the Shining City, accompanied by the thunder of repressed air. They knew the phenomenon, but usually the fireball came a little slower and in smoother flight. Thanks to their complex eyes, the Orgh were able to closely observe the trajectory.

A spaceship, Shaftgal-Xarr thought. A spherical ship of the Arkonides. But damaged. The control maneuvers were not precise.

At least the spacecraft is arriving on time, Shaftgal-Cull added. *At least, if it contains the expected commission.*

Gal-Enn ordered an arrow glider. *We will welcome them, no matter who they are. Come. No hasty decisions.*

"You're late! I don't appreciate the lack of punctuality!"

A man in the uniform of an Arkonide astronaut received the three Orgh at the ground air lock. The spherical hull of the spacecraft towered huge and menacingly above them. The ship measured five hundred meters and was built less as transport and more as a battleship. Its destructive power was...dizzying.

Primary collision! Thought the three Orgh.

"I am Gal-Enn. Forgive me for the rudeness of the...zzzhhh...delay is my goal!" Gal-Enn began. "High commission?"

"Sorry," said the Arkonide succinctly. "I am Commander Agidus da Andeck, this is my ship, the *Peskar*."

"Your will is?"

"Damn, Orgh. The commission is dead. We were attacked by the Methanes and were only able to narrowly escape. I will take

over the task of the commission. We have no time to lose. I hear that the secret weapon has been completed?"

"I signal...zzzhhh...highest sadness," said Gal-Enn. He knew that far too often for non-Orgh, the suffering of the survivors was in the foreground. Why weren't they happy that their top target levels were met?

"Are you ready to give us the weapon?"

Gal-Enn made an affirmatory sign, although he was not quite comfortable with it. He communicated with the two Shaftgals. If the Arkonides possessed the World-Splitter, the fate of the Orgh would be decided.

"We have to stop the flood of Methanes," said da Andeck. "For your sake and ours, I hope that this World-Splitter is worth it. Show us the results!"

We need some time, Shaftgal-Xarr thought. *Only a few hours. Tell him that.*

Don't you feel how hard this man is trying to maintain his posture? This is obvious even to me, Shaftgal-Cull countered. *His quintessential needs wrestle with the primary level. He loses sight of the fact that we only want to help his people, and a perfectly functioning weapon serves this best. However, in his state, he will regard everything that contradicts his demands as sabotage of the primary goal: their victory over the methane-breathers. And like most Arkonides, he will directly relate everything to his quintal plane and react violently.*

Shaftgal-Xarr seemed incredulous. *How can the quintary level be equated with the primary level?*

Gal-Enn came up with a strategy similar to that of the wrong commission. "Immediately! But perhaps the farewell of the dead should be given priority over the visit in terms of its significance? Or is there no need to honor the dead?"

Agidus da Andeck
Kedhassan
Day three, evening

Agidus da Andeck came from a traditional line that had already provided many high-ranking officers. He was proud of his own achievements, but also of those of his ancestors, and he felt the most pride when he saw the Empire's war machine in action.

Eight years ago, he had taken over the *Peskar*, and over the

years, he proudly carried out every order he received. “For Jamila!” he always shouted when it came to the Methanes, and in those moments, he felt more alive than ever. Often, his gaze seemed shaded and unsteady when there was nothing to do that was worthy of his ambition. He wasn’t necessarily popular, but he wasn’t feared either. His people respected him because he had never been defeated and was fair to everyone, from the machine repairman to the deputy commander.

The mighty battleship had provided courier services in the middle of the most competitive sector. It had hunted methane spy ships, fought against the enemy, covered evacuations, and participated in them, and since da Andeck had understood how to keep the *Peskar* in the best condition at all times, she performed well even in tough situations

For Jamila!

And now this! He was supposed to bring the Emperor’s commission to Kedhassan and prepare an objective report on the efficiency of the new weapon. He had no idea how he could have fallen into this trap. Worst of all, the trap was not for him, but for a convoy that was supposed to bring relief material for the embattled Jarkod system. By the time the *Peskar* had completed its transition, it had come out in the middle of the battle—or rather, in the middle of the carnage.

The Methanes’ warships stood seven to one against the Arkonide ships, of which the eight transporters were only sparingly armed. The *Peskar* was the largest ship in the battle, in which da Andeck had only participated because the High Inspector had insisted on it. At least, that’s what he told himself, even if he knew better.

Since the inspector’s family was older and more respected than his, da Andeck had, at least formally, acquiesced. The real reason went deeper: Jamila had been the inspector’s granddaughter. Their hatred of Methanes united and consumed them both and had almost cost Agidus da Andeck his ship and his life.

The *Peskar* had thrown itself into battle and immediately become the main target. Very quickly, far too quickly, they were alone. Perhaps thanks to their intervention, one or two transporters had been able to flee, but da Andeck couldn’t even hope for that. The ship had just corrected its course and accelerated to jump speed when it was hit and lost two engines.

The internal cladding, triple layered, had been torn apart, and some of the energy had penetrated, raw and unbridled, into the central sphere. As if the accident was not enough, the heat shock had melted some pipe connections and thus prevented an umbrella field from building up in front of the passenger rooms. The energy had penetrated and destroyed the very rooms in which the commission was housed, as well as some soldiers' quarters, but that was for the war, and for da Andeck's career it was far less disastrous.

Such a thing couldn't happen; it was excluded from the realm of possibility. The designers and all the experiences of officers known to him had said it wasn't possible—that's how well a spaceship was secured. But apparently not in this case.

The *Peskar* had managed to jump into hyperspace and thus escaped the superiority of their enemies' firepower, but it was severely affected. A short radio exchange with the regional fleet command had been enough to inform the Empire of the incident and request further support. Admiral Goslo da Shavino's instructions were clear: Agidus da Andeck had to complete his original mission; a small fleet of combat ships would be sent after him if the Methanes picked up his trail and discovered Kedhassan.

How would he later explain that the Commission had been killed? He had to procure this weapon; only then could he wash off the blemish of his failure. For Jamila. Only in this way could he prevent what came over his soul like a dark cloud from being noticed by others.

If only I had... But the past was the past.

"Perhaps the farewell of the dead should be given preference over the visit?" asked the leader of the insects. "Or is there no need to honor the dead?"

He's right, da Andeck realized. *How could I forget that? We must honor our fallen, for the glory of all of us. It would be the second unforgivable mistake in a day.*

"We will first bury the dead," he replied. "But you should take the opportunity to make all the necessary preparations. As soon as the ceremony is over, I want to see the World-Splitter."

The three giant insectoids twitched their teardrop-shaped skulls. "Of...zzzhhh...course," confirmed the middle of the three, the responsible Gal of this world.

Gal-Enn
Kedhassan
Day three, night

The glider with the three Orgh flew back to the Shining City. Gal-Enn waited for Shaftgal-Cull to realize the obvious.

What did I say? We were tricked by fraudsters. This da Andeck is undoubtedly a real Arkonide.

Gal-Enn silently agreed. Oh, if only he could fly endlessly in a glider and didn't have to make any decisions! Arkonides like da Andeck knew no doubts. They only distinguished between friend and foe, Arkonide and tool. The Orgh could not expect mercy from him, neither if the World-Splitter failed to function as they wanted nor if he learned that there was a false commission in this world.

Eliminate the fake commission! he finally ordered. *Da Andeck is not allowed to know anything about them.*

Shaftgal-Xarr spoke up. *What about Ogre-214?*

He is working with them on my orders, Gal-Enn replied.

His existence is quintal.

No, you don't understand. Ogre-214 has not yet had a way to contact me. His core mission was to find out whether, with the help of the three strangers, there would be a way to free our people from the Arkonides' blackmail.

He felt discomfort from his companions, and then Shaftgal-Cull contradicted him. *A good plan. But it has become obsolete. Whoever they are and whatever they can do, it's too late.* Peskar *could destroy us all and, as punishment for our spirit of resistance, also our homeland, and that would be the final primary collision. Ogre-214 has become a risk, if only a small one. If the Arkonides question him, he will have too much to reveal.*

Gal-Enn was defeated. *Eliminate Ogre-214!*

12.

Lesly K. Pounder
Tosoma
October 7, 2036

Lesly Pounder growled, which gave his face that characteristic expression that had earned him the nickname “Bulldog.”

“Be careful now!” he blared at the ensign assigned to him as an adjunct. “Treat this sweetheart with respect, it has more years under its belt than your entire family tree!” He pushed himself next to the first navigator and took control. “Watch and pay attention, boy. We’ll remain in the shadow of the planet as long as we can so that the Fantan don’t notice us prematurely.”

The steel sphere with its diameter of eight hundred meters and its characteristic ring bulge, which identified the *Tosoma* as an Arkonide ship, rose from the meteorite crater in which it had been hidden and orbited the dwarf planet Nyfalem, the forty-second and thus outermost body of the Vega system.

The distance to the *Radessora* was small, but acceleration and braking phases were necessary, and they cost valuable time. Pounder steered the *Tosoma* with extreme care and minimal energy expenditure. He called it sneaking, and he never tired of hammering it into the crew. No matter how sophisticated the instruments of modern space travel were, they were ultimately operated by people who had to assess all the data available.

Pounder took advantage of natural conditions, especially the asteroids in this part of the Vega system. Messages were constantly received, location data was revised and processed. He watched as the Fantan dinghy left the mother unit and docked with the *Radessora*. Soon, they would come within weapons range, and then he would fully exploit the superior technology of this ship. The Fantan ship had no chance against the *Tosoma*.

Suddenly, the engines of the Ferron freighter were activated. As expected, the Fantan were testing them. At first, Pounder observed

with satisfaction that the engines that had been sabotaged remained silent so that the *Radessora* would not be maneuverable. But then there was an explosion not far from where he knew Julian and Mildred to be! How could this happen?

"Scramble!" he shouted as he hit the corresponding button.

The *Tosoma* lurched and raced forward with increasing speed. *So much for "treat them with respect,"* Pounder thought grimly. But this was an emergency.

"Immediately activate push-button pulses on the freighter! Look for protective shield emissions and any signs of life!" he instructed the man at the sensors. Then he whirled around. "And the fire control stations should stand down until I give the command!" He turned back to the tracking officer. "Results?"

The man lifted his shoulders. "I had the energy impulses of two protective shields for a moment, but now there's nothing."

Pounder furrowed his brow. "What do you think that means?"

"Unclear." The man was sweating. "In any case, the protective shields were activated at the time of the explosion. But I can't say whether they were overloaded and destroyed by the explosion or whether the screens simply shut down after the greatest danger had passed." He took a look at the display. "The Fantan ship is starting its engines! They've discovered us and are trying to escape!"

"After them! Push the engines to their maximum!"

At full thrust, the *Tosoma* raced in the direction of the *Radessora*. Small asteroids were destroyed upon impact against their shields, so it almost looked as if they were plowing through space. Their distance to the fleeing Fantan ship had diminished noticeably. But the humans would never get the Fantan within range of their tractor beam before the alien ship could jump into hyperspace.

"We could damage the ship, make it incapable of maneuvering," suggested the weapons control officer, a young sergeant named Dhara with Indian or Pakistani roots. A capable, ambitious man, as Pounder had already noted. "A surgical shot, so to speak."

Pounder shook his head. "No, leave it."

"But..."

"No buts, understood?"

He saw the ship suddenly disappear from their screens. The sensors recorded a strong transition. The Fantan were gone.

"With all due respect, sir, you should have let us shoot!"

complained Sergeant Dhara.

Pounder instructed the navigator to set course for the *Radessora* and then turned toward Dhara. “I have taken note of your suggestion. I strongly recommend that you take a look at the footage of recent spaceship battles. Look at the wrecks! Just a tiny mistake, a tiny target deviation, and the Fantan ship would have been destroyed. And then?”

Dhara turned up his nose. “My men are good! We would never have missed! Don’t you think about Manoli and the others at all?”

The other crew members were now looking at the two officers.

“So, you can guarantee me that nothing would have happened to the Fantan?” asked Pounder.

“I...” Dhara began.

“Just as our specialists guaranteed me that all *Radessora* systems are perfectly trimmed?”

“No, I...”

“Do you think our technicians are liars or incompetent?”

Dhara continued to withstand his gaze. “With all due respect, sir...” He looked around for help. “No, sir.”

Pounder nodded. “Exactly. Accidents happen. And you’ll still get your chance.”

“What do you mean by that?”

The holos painted a peaceful, silent picture of the surrounding space. Nothing was reminiscent of the fleeing Fantan ship or the explosion on the *Radessora*. *Young Tifflor could still achieve great things. I will personally train him to be the best pilot this side of Vega, if only he survives,* thought NASA’s former flight director. Until recently, he had not even dared to dream of entering space himself at his age, and now he found himself the commander of a gigantic spaceship.

The illness afflicting Manoli, Gucky, Sid, and Fulkar was certainly bad, but he was not responsible for it. For the accident that may have cost the lives of two young people, however, he was very much so.

He noticed how his people looked at him as if they had been waiting too long for an answer, but the answer was so close. He knew that they had lost a lot of time and would lose even more due to the necessary change of course, but that wouldn’t stop him from trying something. He had to head for the *Radessora* anyway.

“The mother ship may have fled, but the dinghy might still be

there…”

13.

Crest
Kedhassan
Day three, night

"I believe you. Come on!" Nurghe held out a hand to Crest. "And you'll treat them like guests!" he snorted at the other Ilts.

"Until Plofre decides otherwise," Dhargan clarified. The black-furred Ilt remained a few steps behind the three strangers. "Ricle, Muroc, you take the lizard and pseudo-Arkonide by the hand so that nothing happens to them. Let no one say we don't take care of our guests. I'll take care of the beetle." His voice dripped with contempt.

Two Ilts approached Trker-Hon and Michalovna and silently held out their hands. Despite all the scratches and dirt on them, they looked like children's hands, small and petite.

"Come," said one Ilt, grabbing Michalovna's hand as she hesitated. "You can trust us."

"Until Plofre decides otherwise?" she asked.

"Until Plofre decides otherwise," the Ilt replied with great seriousness.

They walked through the tunnels and corridors for at least half an hour, farther and farther down until they entered a large cavern. Stairs led to the bottom of the cave, and along the walls were additional caves. Ilts floated up to the entrances, carried by their own mental powers, or simply teleported from staircase to staircase. It seemed playful, but Crest sensed it was anything but.

"You're training?" he asked Nurghe.

He nodded grimly. "For war. The time of play is over. Look!" He pointed to a kind of obstacle course on the ground, which consisted of crevices, boulders, greasy-looking puddles, and more. Primitive but difficult. There were two groups of Ilts lurking, equipped with light handguns and some with natural psychic abilities. With light hand movements, telekinetics threw stones at

their respective opponents; teleporters brought themselves into a better shooting position or back from the battle.

The visitors looked around again. Everything the Ilts did served the war in some way. Every game, every training session made them faster, stronger, or more agile.

"We have no choice," Nurghe answered the unspoken question. "The Orgh drove us underground."

Dhargan interrupted without letting go of Ogre-214's hand. "Your friends," he said, casting an evil eye at the Orgh, "drove us out of our city first. We put up with it. Then they ignored us, and we could live with that, at least as long as the atmosphere was still good. But as the air got thinner and thinner, we had to return. Then they killed us when we got too close to them. That, too, was no reason for us to go to war. But now..." He fell silent.

Ogre-214 showed no emotion in the face of these accusations.

"Now," Nurghe said, picking up the thread again, "they are deliberately chasing us. Some are killed, others disappear. Most of them we will find again one day. Thrown out, dead, like...animals. We don't know what happened to them. And those who know can no longer report anything."

"No one survived?" asked Crest. Breathing was difficult for him; his neck and chest hurt. Waves of pain washed over his feet and spilled higher.

"Only one," said General Dhargan. He pointed behind her. "You already know Morry."

"Murderer!" Morry's voice shouted from the background.

"Yes," Nurghe said sadly. "Morry was the only one to survive, but she doesn't remember anything. Her mind is jumbled."

They have no idea about Gal-Enn's project, concluded Crest's extra mind, unimpressed by the suffering of the Ilts' words. *Do you want to tell them the truth?*

That would not relieve their pain.

"Don't you want to tell us, Orgh?" asked Dhargan. He pushed Ogre-214 firmly between the two lower thirds of the insectoid's body where his body armor was thin.

Ogre-214 stopped stiffly. "Your primary goal is survival?"

"Yes."

"Then everything is said," explained the Orgh.

"What do you mean by that?" asked Michalovna.

Ogre-214 did not answer, but Crest sensed the truth. If the Orgh

and the Arkonides left Kedhassan, they would leave the Ilts behind on this dead world unless they thought they could benefit from them somehow.

That is possible, agreed his extra mind.

Trker-Hon cleared his throat. He held the Ilt named Ricle by the hand. “Why are you here? Move away from the Orgh, leave the city. That will help you avoid the conflict.”

“Not possible,” Nurghe said. “Tramp is hostile to life. From year to year, the air is getting thinner, the planet is getting cooler. Without technology, we cannot survive. We are not animals.”

“Tramp? That’s what you call your world? Not Kedhassan?” asked Crest in surprise. Gucky had also called his home world Tramp. So there were connections, even if he could not yet grasp them. What role did Gucky and the Ilts play in his search?

“Kedhassan is the name the Arkonides brought,” Dhargan grumbled. “We will never call our world that!”

“Maybe you can help us understand your world,” suggested Trker-Hon. “Why, for example, do we experience day and night here even though the sun never disappears from its zenith during the daytime phase? This indicates that Tramp has no rotation of its own.”

Dhargan looked at him in surprise and exchanged a thoughtful glance with Nurghe. The two remained silent.

“Did I say something wrong?” asked the Topsidan.

“No,” Nurghe replied.

“No,” Dhargan repeated. “I think I was wrong. Do you accept my apology? That doesn’t apply to you, beetle!” he growled at Ogre-214.

Trker-Hon hummed a confirmation. “Everyone is wrong. We Topsidans say: ‘Always seek the truth. If you should meet it, rejoice; such meetings are rare, especially in war.’”

“What about his question?” asked Michalovna.

Nurghe looked at them in turn, except for Ogre-214. “They have no idea about this world. I’ll explain it to you later. Although I doubt you’ll believe it without seeing it.”

Crest clenched his hand around that of Ilts. “Have my people committed a crime against this world? Is it dying because of them?”

“There are more important things to do than to talk about a long-decided death. You need help, right? Come, we have to go through this corridor there.” He pointed to one of the cave

entrances on the other side of the cavern.

Tatiana Michalovna
Kedhassan
Day three, night

While descending the stairs, crossing the cavern floor, and then climbing back up, Michalovna had time to look at the entire complex. Much was reminiscent of the architectural style of the Shining City—pipes, of course bundled in threes, an encapsulated machine in the same covering as the street—but there was just as much that did not fit. She suspected these things were from the Ilts; she recognized it not only by the material, but by the raw and unfinished details and the completely different design and technical understanding. The Ilts often relied on their mental powers to make life comfortable for themselves, while the builders of the city had to rely on their technology and artistry.

She watched the Ilts. Most pretended not to take notice of them, but she felt their curiosity. Hidden glances, the flick of a thought. That's all it was, but it was enough.

She, in turn, stretched out her mind. It was worse than she had thought—these beings carried with them a terrible burden, at least as heavy as the Orgh. They were afraid, felt naked fear for their lives. And not so much their own lives, but those of the other Ilts. They loved each other like a big family in which there may be friction but one stood up for the other.

They had, at least for Michalovna, what she called a Russian soul. She knew this conflict between melancholy and the simultaneous feeling of being there for each other from her childhood in Saint Petersburg. She sometimes wished to go back home.

"Are you aware that you and the Orgh have a lot in common?" she asked the Ilt holding her hand. Ricle stared at her in horror through his dachshund eyes. She could understand him well, but visually it was a strange idea to compare the large, scrawny insectoids with the rather stocky little fur creatures.

"You fear being wiped out by the Orgh, just as they fear the same from the Arkonides." Her voice sounded louder than intended, and more than one Ilt from her accompanying group looked at her angrily. What she said was like sacrilege. After all, they were

fighting for their lives.

"Then they understand all the better to stop their actions," whispered an Ilt behind her. "They hate us."

To Michalovna's surprise, Ogre-214 spoke. "We don't hate you. Hatred...makes everything collide."

"Then why are you killing and persecuting us?" Ricle let go of Michalovna's hand. His body trembled with indignation.

Ogre-214 moved his head in such a way that it seemed like a bow. "We are looking for salvation."

Crest
Kedhassan
Day three, night

They entered the corridor that Nurghe had pointed out earlier, which was no different from all the other cave openings. But after a few steps, it widened into a whole new world. The furnishings seemed to coincide with the aesthetics of the Shining City. The room, which was a good fifty meters in diameter, was dome-shaped, with beds that were laid out in three levels on top of each other. In twenty of the beds lay wounded Ilts, secured by energy fields of varying colors. In the middle of the room stood a central column consisting of three strands, which looked like brushed steel. Around them ran spiral glass tubes in which blue-white points of light pulsed like small, weak hearts.

"This is our clinic." Nurghe licked his gnawing tooth. "Strictly speaking, it's the city builders', but since they haven't visited for a long time, we consider it ours. Don't ask me how, but it works." He pointed to a free bed. "Please, lie down there."

Crest did as he was told. Could it really be possible? In this strange world that seemed so dead, was there a chance that he could return to life?

The Arkonide felt a gentle vibration, then the bed was raised upward and toward the center column. When it was still three meters away, tentacles suddenly slid out of the column and connected to the front of the bed. Much thinner, almost transparent cables shot out of the top and sides of the bed and touched the old Arkonide; the touch was so gentle that he normally would have barely felt it. However, the pain of the cancer nearly forced out a scream.

I'm dying, he thought, *but I want to live.*

A soft hum was in the air, crackling as if someone was crumpling aluminum foil. Nothing else could be heard, smelled, or seen. Eventually, the thin cables disappeared again, the thick tentacles detaching from the bed and disappearing into the column as the bed itself lowered to its old position. But the pain remained, this time surging through Crest's intestines. The old man groaned.

"Lie down!" Nurghe suggested.

"When can I expect an examination? I don't know how long I have left."

"It has already happened. Just give the machine a little more time. The preparation of the data in a form that we can understand can take a little while." The Ilt stumbled. "How did you know that we could help you?"

"Ogre-214 told us," he cut in.

"The beetle?" asked Dhargan in surprise. "How could he know?"

"We know about such facilities," Ogre-214 said simply. "We don't need them. That's why we built sleeping facilities there instead. But there had to be more. Subterranean. Where you hide."

Crest tried to sit up, leaning on his elbows. "You were...guessing?"

"It was likely," Ogre-214 said calmly.

Crest sent his companions out when the machine announced by a beep that the results were available. He didn't want them to be disappointed. That which ate him up would not be so easy to drive away, he was sure.

"I'm sorry," Nurghe confirmed after taking a closer look at the holographic representation of Crest's body. He pointed to some markings, and the Arkonide immediately recognized what he meant.

"This cancer is far advanced, further than even this miracle machine can handle. You've come to us too late to be healed."

I knew it. "I understand." He wanted to say more, but his voice failed. He had known, so why did the news make him so sad? If only the pain would go away! "How... How long do I have left?"

Nurghe scrutinized him. "You don't want to know that."

Crest lowered his head and closed his eyes. The pain did not diminish; it crept between his fingers. "I'll be the first to know, that's for sure."

“It’s going to go faster and faster,” Nurghe said. “When the metastases in your internal organs...” He fell silent.

“Nevertheless: thank you very much.” Crest took both the Ilt’s hands. “I will try to save your people. Yours and the Orgh.”

Nurghe bowed. “Thank you. But I wasn’t done yet.” He took a deep breath and waved toward the central column. A compartment opened and a kind of bracelet flew into his outstretched hand. “The machine can’t cure you, but it has at least tailored a pain therapy drug to your body. Here, you see: ten ampoules. You only need to press one against your forearm; it will then inject itself. The contents should be enough to give you strength for quite a while and relieve the pain. If you handle it carefully and don’t overexert yourself, they will last until your final minute.”

Crest sighed softly. That was much more than he could have expected. “I don’t know how to thank you...”

“Oh,” said the Ilt, “that was nothing. The machine is standing around here anyway and only has to regrow a few body parts from time to time. But this beetle... Clever, I have to admit. When I tell Plofre...” He laughed softly.

“Would you please send in my companions?”

“Of course.”

Nurghe waved to an Ilt, and a few moments later Trker-Hon, Michalovna, and Ogre-214 returned. Crest told them about the results of the examination and the painkiller the machine had made for him. They reacted cautiously but were happy. They had probably expected more.

“Thank you for leading us here,” he said to Ogre-214, who had listened silently to all the explanations.

“What lives, lives. What dies, dies. That hasn’t changed.”

“Well, you have a real ray of sunshine for a companion,” said Nurghe, who looked at the Orgh. “Beetle logic.”

Crest closed his mouth. It really wasn’t easy with the insectoids. Then he turned to Nurghe. “I know that we are only a few and even strangers in this world. But I will try to help you as much as I can.”

“I don’t think you’ll get very far. Or can you give us special military training? You are not a soldier.”

Crest smiled. “No, I’m not. Not in the way you understand it. But I know one thing: the Orgh are not your enemies. They were only made to be your enemies. My people are your true enemy and don’t even know it.”

From the ranks of the Ilts who had gathered in the door came a disapproving squeak. “It’s all just talk! Who is persecuting us? The Orgh! And what can we do? We will hunt them down!”

Trker-Hon stood next to Crest. “He’s right, don’t you see that? If we succeed in determining the cause of the actions to eliminate the Orgh, you can live in peace, and no one has to die anymore.”

The Ilts murmured restlessly. They probably felt that the two men were telling the truth, or at least what they thought it was. But what was the point?

“You are wrong,” said Ogre-214 at that moment. “There are collisions that cannot simply be reversed. Even if you save us. Even if we leave the Ilts alone. They will die. Soon. This world is coming to an end.”

Tatiana Michalovna
Kedhassan
Day three, night

Nurghe turned around, his wide beaver tail splashing to the ground. “Ah, finally you’re telling the truth.”

Farther out, someone was screaming. It sounded like Morry. “Murderer!”

“Wait!” Michalovna turned to the Orgh. “When this world ends, you will be able to save yourself with your spaceships. Can’t you take the Ilts with you?”

“The Gal will only take them if he sees a benefit in them.”

“Then we will have to convince him it is useful to save lives!”

“What lives, lives. What dies…”

“Oh, stop it!” she shouted. “You have to at least try.”

“That is not possible,” said General Dhargan. The black mousebeaver seemed as if he felt sorry for his own words. “We can’t let you go. You know our hiding place.”

“He’s right,” Nurghe said.

“We won’t betray you,” Crest promised. “None of us. Not even Ogre-214.”

“I don’t contribute to the primary collision,” the Orgh said. “I’m not going to tell on you.”

Nurghe shook his head. “I’m sorry. It’s simply not possible.”

Listen to me! Morry’s voice echoed through Michalovna’s mind.

Do you want to insult me again?

I know what you've seen. I remember. Suddenly, Morry's voice became very soft. *My child is still there, you know? My child who was forced upon me. That I loved so much that... No, forgive me. Thank you for reawakening my memory. It hurts so much... I...* Her voice was lost in a murmur.

What did you want to tell me? Michalovna asked.

Ask Plofre! Plofre has to decide! No one disagrees with Plofre!

Michalovna nodded. *Thank you!*

Morry's mental voice became weaker. *I still can't stand you!*

Aloud, Michalovna said, "Don't you think you'd better ask Plofre before you make a mistake?"

General Dhargan nodded. "Yes. Plofre should decide."

Nurghe showed his rodent tooth. "Excellent idea. Could have come from me. Wait, I'll be right back!"

He disappeared, and it wasn't long before he returned. "Plofre agrees. I'm sure General Dhargan and his people would like to escort you back to the surface."

"We must hurry," said Ogre-214. "They will notice your absence during the day."

"There are shortcuts," the black Ilt assured him. "Even for the likes of you."

The Ilts kept their word: Nurghe, Dhargan, Morry, and the others politely escorted their initially unwelcome guests back to the borders of the lower town. Ogre-214 was about to open the door when someone telekinetically gently pulled his arm away.

"Is there a problem?"

"We thought you would be interested in the fact that a large Arkonide spacecraft recently landed."

The commission! Michalovna thought.

"That limits our possibilities," Crest said thoughtfully.

"Limit?" asked Michalovna. "You are a master of understatement."

"Does that mean you're giving up?" Nurghe looked at the Arkonide.

"A da Zoltral does not give up." Crest exchanged a quick glance with Trker-Hon and Michalovna. "Are we going back? Perhaps we can reach an agreement with the commission."

"An agreement?" Ogre-214 and Dhargan asked at the same time.

“I recommend you stay here,” the Orgh added. “My people will hunt you down. They will prevent the Arkonides from knowing about their mistake.”

“They’re not going to kill us,” Crest promised. “If their fear of my people is as great as you say, they will not dare do so.”

“They do not fear your people. They fear for their own people. My people.”

Michalovna pushed the door open. “We have to try. The faster, the better.”

She carefully entered the street. “Nothing to see. Come on!” She waved to Crest and Trker-Hon.

At the same moment, she saw the shadows. Floating platforms with heavily armed Orgh on board rose up behind the buildings. They spoke silently to each other, but the telepath knew immediately what was happening.

“Retreat!” she shouted and raced back to the lower town.

Then the first ray weapons fired in the Shining City.

14.

Skelir
Ferron Freighter
October 7, 2036

"It wasn't me!" shouted Jenves.

Skelir first saw an engine explode, then an aggregate in the umbrella generators, another, then another, again an engine...

"As if it were you," he hissed. "Just look at this chain reaction! Something is exploding or breaking everywhere!"

"Luckily not our suits..."

An ominous creak interrupted him, and then the *Radessora* was thrown to the side; it staggered and rotated several times around its own axis.

"Our Besun!" howled Jenves.

Skelir dealt him a blow to the center of his body. "Focus on the displays! This was a trap and you fell for it!"

"Me?" Jenves screamed indignantly. "You were the one..."

"Here!" Skelir pointed at a holo. It showed an Arkonide battleship that had appeared at high speed behind the outermost planet of the system and was on a direct course for the *Sregar-Nakut*.

"The Great Empire," Jenves whispered. "Now we are lost."

"No! Look closely. This is an ancient model. The *Tosoma*. Humans are after us."

"Humans want us as Besun! We have to go!"

"Our crew probably sees it the same way." Skelir pointed to the monitor. "Unbelievable."

Jenves rippled in surprise. "They're leaving us here?"

"Obviously."

"I hope the humans shoot them down!"

Skelir laughed. "The good old *Sregar-Nakut*? It's too fast for that. Look, she's already gone."

Jenves groaned. "Great. Then the *Tosoma* is guaranteed to come

here next. Go, we have to go!”

They ran off, moving quickly. But the swirling movements of the vacuumed ship made it difficult for them to escape. Loose equipment flew around, and they had to be careful not to let it damage their suits. They refrained from using flying units because they would have been exposed to the ever-changing environment thanks to the tumbling, rotating ship. The adhesive soles of their suits, on the other hand, ensured that they could ignore the movements of the ship.

Finally, the two Fantan reached the same air lock through which they had recently entered the *Radessora*. Behind it, their dinghy was waiting. Even if it wasn’t suitable for hyperspace, they could hide in the Vega system and call for help.

They rushed outside. In front of them stood their ship, properly locked and secured. Skelir pointed his encoder at the lock. Infinitely slowly, it opened.

“Where should we go?” Jenves became more panicked from one moment to the next.

“I suggest you leave your UFO and wait for the taxi you ordered,” said a voice he did not recognize. He felt pressure on his body. “What could be better than enjoying the light of the stars?”

Jenves looked down at himself and recognized the mouth of a radiation weapon pointed at him. It was in the hands of a human. “Skelir?” he whined.

“Oh, pull yourself together,” came the reply. Jenves saw that he too was being held at bay by a man with a gun.

Accepting his fate, the Fantan looked out at the stars.

15.

Gal-Enn
Kedhassan
Day four, morning

The red sun looked down on Kedhassan like it always had. It was exactly where it always was. It was time for the ritual to commemorate the dead.

On a hill within sight of the city stood da Andeck, his leading officers, and a row of Orgh accompanying Gal-Enn—all Shaftgals.

Da Andeck kept the ceremony as simple and as military as possible. After careful consideration, he had decided to bring the corpses back to Arkon in cryostasis. Instead of a funeral, he had onboard robots erect a memorial stele, a core made of Arkonide steel, encased in a bronzed shell with the names of the dead engraved on it. The stele looked like an obelisk with bronze flowers growing at the foot.

"We live for a war we didn't want. We are dying in a war that has been forced upon us. We will win so that there will be no more such wars." Da Andeck struggled for personal words, but none seemed to come. There were too many victims. Not just the five-member commission, but also some accompanying soldiers had died.

"We stand between light and darkness. We stand between nothingness and the stars. We are fighting for Arkon's glory and honor!"

The officers tilted their heads, and a soft melody sounded, an ancient song traditionally played at soldiers' funerals. Blood in the snow.

Before the melody had faded, a sound like thunder shot out of the Shining City. Black smoke rose and spread under the force field. "What is that?" said da Andeck to Gal-Enn. "Don't you know any respect for the dead?"

Gal-Enn felt events slip away from him. He sank a little deeper

into his legs so as not to irritate the Arkonide more than necessary.

"Forgiveness is a request, High Inspector," Gal-Enn said helplessly. He did not understand why the Arkonide reacted this way. His fellow citizens were dead, the ceremony was completed, and he himself was not in danger.

He must not know that we…are chasing the wrong commission.

Shaftgal-Cull came to his side. *It's not just those three. They have a lot of Ilts with them.*

Ilts?

"Ilts have appeared in the city. Occasionally, they come out of their holes. There is no cause for concern. The matter will be settled immediately."

As if in reaction, the battle scene in the Shining City increased in intensity. Flashes of fire twitched under the force field. Gal-Enn immediately sent word to the Orgh in town. They would hear him and obey him. After all, it was about more than just the inhabitants of Kedhassan.

The inspector is indignant! The risk of primary collision is increasing. Wipe out that brood before he brings a death sentence upon all of us!

There are too many! came the prompt response from Shaftgal-Vall. *And in addition to weapons, they also have their psychic abilities! We need time!*

Find their nest and smoke them out! Time is the only thing we don't have.

"The destruction of the Ilts is more a question of time than a question of resources." Gal-Enn tried to dispel Agidus da Andeck's concerns.

"Don't come at me with such excuses," said da Andeck. "Apparently, it is far from being taken care of. You are too confident. I have read about Ilts in reports. Why weren't they eliminated long ago?"

"It would have cost great effort. We need all the resources for war-critical projects. The Ilts are simply annoying."

The ground shook and a three-way tower of the Shining City collapsed as if in slow motion, causing debris to fly through the city, as if guided by invisible hands. Several Orgh gliders were smashed.

"Your failure will not be my failure. These Ilts are extremely annoying. They hinder the war effort. We will eliminate them!"

“There is no need for assistance!” exclaimed Gal-Enn hastily.

Agidus da Andeck laughed gruffly. “It will give my people courage. A victory is always good for morale. Our real enemy is waiting up there.”

He raised his bracelet communicator to his lips. “Da Andeck to the crew of the *Peskar*. You have orders to fire on all the Ilts you can locate. Shore leave granted for hunting.”

“Confirmed,” came a woman’s voice from the *Peskar*. “Good idea, Commander. We shall act immediately.”

“And now,” the Arkonide turned to Gal-Enn again, “bring me to the World-Splitter. I have no more time to lose!”

16.

Skelir
Berenger IV
October 7, 2036

"Keep still!" Dr. Haggard pulled up a large syringe and smiled at it. "Your skin is a bit too tough for our normal instruments. Unfortunately, I need a blood sample from you."

Skelir and Jenves watched the large man suspiciously.

"You could let us go," Skelir suggested.

"There is a treaty," Jenves added. "You're not allowed to keep us here."

"We didn't break the treaty," replied Haggard, stabbing the syringe into Jenves's body. "Your actions, your consequences. It's as simple as that."

"I'm not even sure where you took us."

Haggard put the syringe away and repeated the procedure with another syringe on Skelir. "You are in my makeshift little hospital on the fourth moon of Berenger." He took the two blood samples and put them in an analysis unit. "It's going to take a little while. In case you're wondering why we're here, the lack of atmosphere could help contain the epidemic."

"Epidemic?" asked Skelir. "What kind of epidemic?"

"The plague you introduced to Earth," Haggard claimed.

Jenves blustered. "We haven't been to Earth yet!" he disagreed.

"Not you personally," Haggard reassured them. "But it was Fantan. We have asked you here so that you can help us to control it."

"We don't keep an epidemic in our luggage when we travel to foreign worlds," Skelir argued. "We Fantan are an experienced spacefaring civilization and take every conceivable safety precaution. It is in our interest as well as for those we visit."

"Is that so?" Haggard gasped. "Then explain to me why we have four patients here who are dying after they came into contact with

you! Come with us; I'll show you!"

Only twenty meters separated the laboratory in which Haggard had "carried out experiments" on the two Fantan, as Jenves called it, to the infirmary that hosted four creatures known to the two Fantan all too well: former Besun.

"Oh," Jenves said. "Oh."

Skelir said nothing, but he was just as shocked.

At the same moment, the four sick people strained upward in their beds. They tore at the straps holding them down. And they screamed. They were wordless, empty screams, but it was clear for whom the screams were meant.

Haggard reacted quickly and instinctively correctly. "Get out!" He slammed the door from the inside.

They still heard his voice: "I want an explanation! As soon as I have this under control!"

Then security guards showed up and escorted the two Fantan into a small, windowless room at least a hundred meters from the infirmary.

"Oh," Jenves said again. "Oh."

17.

Crest
Kedhassan
Day four, morning

The Shining City had become a cauldron. The fiery blast, which had been aimed at Tatiana Michalovna, Crest, and Trker-Hon, had not only brought down a complex of towers, but also incited the anger of the Ilts. The Shining City was their home. They had been driven out of it, but they would not allow the Orgh to destroy it.

In no time at all, more and more Ilts appeared and stormed outside, engaging the Orgh, who in turn requested further support.

Dhargan's troops remained with the three strangers. This proved to be fortunate, as the Orgh were now advancing into the lower town on the hunt for their victims. Without the local knowledge and military training of the Ilts, their attempt to escape would have been over long ago.

Eventually, Dhargan brought them to another corridor that led directly to the surface, albeit just outside the Shining City. What they saw brought Crest almost to the brink of despair: Arkonide gliders and even dinghies circled over the city, intervening in the fighting on the side of the Orgh.

"This...can't be. That's not the nature of the Empire. This is barbaric."

Trker-Hon supported him with one hand. "We are in a barbaric time. You people are no better and no worse than others. Come, we'll go underground again."

They turned around and climbed back into the corridor, where they were received by Nurghe with bad news. "A group of Orgh managed to break into the corridors. They are just behind us."

"There's no point! We can't escape and we're trapped if we stay here!" Trker-Hon sounded bitter. "I was never supposed to die like this."

"You could surrender," Michalovna suggested.

Nurghe laughed grimly. “There’s no mercy for us. We have only one chance: Plofre’s long-term plan!”

Michalovna clenched his hands. “That must be a miracle plan. Do you have any details for us?”

The Ilt said no. “There is no alternative. We must believe in Plofre.”

“There’s nothing you can do. You will die,” Ogre-214 said firmly. “What dies, dies.”

“And what lives, lives!” said Michalovna angrily. “How about you go outside and persuade your people to cease fire? Did you even consider that?”

“It wouldn’t change anything. I took you to the Ilts. I am as guilty as you are. I accept death. My death saves the others.”

Nurghe laughed shrilly. “You’re a weirdo, my friend! But you’re probably right. They won’t listen to you; they’ll shoot you right away.”

Now Crest got up. His face was like stone. “We have another option. I’ll go up and surrender myself to the Arkonides.”

“No, you won’t!” protested Michalovna. “That would mean sacrificing your life senselessly!”

Trker-Hon raised a hand, gasping from the physical strain of fleeing. “Wait. Honorable Crest certainly has a plan.”

Crest gave a strained smile. “Arkonides know grace throughout, if only to be able to interrogate a prisoner. No one from the crew of the battle cruiser knows about my presence. The soldiers will not shoot an Arkonide who suddenly appears out of nowhere. At least not on the spot.”

“It’s far too dangerous,” protested Michalovna.

“I tend to agree with you,” Trker-Hon said. “That doesn’t sound like a well-considered approach.”

“It’s not. But look at it this way: I am a terminally ill man. What do I have to lose? Besides, I never claimed that was all I had in mind…”

18.

Skelir
Berenger IV
October 7, 2036

“He’s trying to provoke us!” Jenves was outraged. “Not only do they treat us like Besun, they’re enjoying us seeing our former Besun!”

Skelir gesticulated with two arms. “Not a word more!” He laboriously scuttled on the two extremities often used as leg elements through the empty, cuboid space, searching for telltale camera eyes or microphone ears. It was hard to imagine that such a thing did not exist.

The encounter with the former Besun had hit him harder than he wanted to admit. His thoughts raced as he searched incessantly for eavesdropping equipment. Four Besun. Four.

Not five. Not six.

His finely scaled cylindrical body bent to the limits of its physique. He gasped. He hammered against the walls, scratched the floor, and stared up to the ceiling.

They don’t know. They know nothing. If we remain silent, we’ll be safe. At most, they can guess, but that’s not enough. We just need to be silent.

Eventually, he gave up. “The room is clean.”

“Of course, it is,” Jenves said. “And it doesn’t have any eavesdropping equipment. We can speak freely.”

Skelir let himself sink down to the ground against the bare wall. “Then talk!”

The other Fantan seemed amazed that he should speak first. “Thank you!” He came closer to Skelir and examined him with all his senses. “You recognized them too, didn’t you?”

“How could I not?”

Jenves sighed. “Then I wasn’t wrong. The Macaw and the Ilt were among the most valuable Besun of our people. And remember

what we did with the other two…"

"They fled Myranar," Skelir recalled. "Why did they do that? What's wrong for them to be Besun? Can there be anything better for them?"

"You're asking the wrong person. Besun are sometimes ungrateful. Like the fish of Khal that I once brought with me. He also died."

"Because you put him in the wrong water."

"Right. You wouldn't have thought of the salt requirement either! But that didn't happen to us with these people."

"No," Skelir agreed. "We took good care of them." *I did everything possible. Is she still alive?*

"And now they're dying." Jenves didn't sound particularly worried.

"Should we help them?"

"How are you going to do that without telling them who we are?"

Skelir thought for a moment. "I'll tell them."

"You can't do that! Under no circumstances should they know who we are! Otherwise they'll kill us!"

"They won't. If we do not reveal ourselves, our former Besun dies."

Jenves let himself fall on his side and lay there like an oversized sausage filled to the point of bursting. His scales made soft, ringing sounds on the smooth tile floor as he moved.

"Too bad for the Besun. Good for us. They can't give us away anymore."

Skelir did not understand how Jenves could still be so…traditional. Hadn't he experienced the same thing with the Besun as he had? "I don't want them to die!" He shouted violently.

Jenves sat up. He now spoke slowly and reassuringly as if with…well, a cripple. Which Skelir was, after all, with his two-thirds arms. Skelir, the outsider.

"If the Besun had stayed with us, nothing would have happened to them. What is happening to them is not our fault. And we will certainly find Besun of equal value."

Skelir was silent, his thoughts caught up in the past when the Besun were still there. He hadn't thought much of the two exotic beings, but of the ordinary ones who…had been so Besun that all his blood valves filled as if intoxicated.

He thought of only one name: Sue. Sue Mirafiore. Such a small creature, so disproportionate in everything she was: far too thin, far too tough, much too busy. She had been a bit like him, a human child with fewer extremities than the others.

But people didn't seem to treat them like lepers. Not like the Fantan. Perhaps he simply lacked the receptors for this alien race.

He still knew exactly how he had felt the moment he'd realized that her missing arm had grown back. The feeling had been a mixture of grief and triumph, of hope and despair. And then she had fled, just like the others.

But the others were in a room, very close. Four out of six. Like his extremities. Was that a sign?

"Why aren't you saying anything?" Jenves nudged him. "Are you really thinking about telling the humans our secret? Are you trying to get yourself killed?"

Skelir remained silent. What would Sue have done in his place? Why was it so difficult to understand? She would have helped, he thought. She and the rest of the humans would have done anything for each other in their community. That's how they had managed to escape.

He kept pondering, letting Jenves talk and talk. That doctor, Haggard, seemed like Sue, like these others. He would do anything to save the former Besun. Above all, he would also save them.

Skelir got up. He walked to the door and banged on it. "Haggard! Haggard, I have to speak to you!"

19.

Gal-Enn
Kedhassan
Day four, morning

The presentation ended. The lights in the headquarters of the World-Splitter went on again.

"So, this is our secret weapon." Agidus da Andeck seemed undecided as to what to make of it. He sat quietly in the commander's chair without any discernible emotion. "And you are sure that everything works exactly as in your presentation?"

He mistrusts us, Shaftgal-Xarr thought. *Primary collision continues to threaten.*

Only a fool believes a theory. And da Andeck doesn't seem to me to be a fool, Gal-Enn replied telepathically. *He has a right to doubt. If we can convince him, our homeland will be saved.*

"The World-Splitter is at your disposal," said Shaftgal-Cull. "The station is sufficiently staffed with trained personnel."

"All Orgh?" The Arkonide pushed a few strands of white hair from his forehead.

"Yes. We restored this station."

Da Andeck made a dismissive gesture. "I know. On our second test flight, Arkonides will be at your side. But for now, it's enough for me if you prove to me that this thing works. Prepare everything. Target the outermost planet of this system, Suleys. In the meantime, I will inform myself on the state of affairs regarding the fight against the rebellious Ilts."

"The preparation is commencing," said Gal-Enn.

"Hurry. We don't have much time."

"If we act too hastily..." warned Shaftgal-Cull.

"I don't want to hear about problems. Give me solutions! And if you can't think of one right away, just think of your home planet!"

Do we have news of the battle in the Shining City? asked Gal-Enn.

It's a massacre, Shaftgal-Xarr replied. *Do you understand the*

Arkonides? The Ilts do not mean a primary collision, and eliminating them does not bring any advantages at the secondary, tertiary or quaternary levels.

I suppose Gal-Enn feels that their motivations are quintessential in nature. He thought for a moment. *You know that the same fate threatens us? Even if we manage to hand over the World-Splitter ready for action, the Arkonides will not be satisfied with that. They will make further demands of us and exterminate us like the Ilts when we get annoying to them or have no new advances to offer.*

He felt the hesitation of the other two. *It is conceivable*, Shaftgal-Xarr admitted.

It's even likely, Shaftgal-Cull added. *What can we do?*

Gal-Enn watched as Agidus da Andeck received the reports from the Arkonides. He wasn't happy; he didn't even enjoy it. This man would walk over corpses to achieve his goal.

Release the para-fighters, erase the programming of their detonators, and make sure gliders are ready for them. They are needed in the Shining City.

Shaftgal-Cull winced. *The warriors are not trained! We cannot control them!*

Gal-Enn tried to give the two Shaftgals confidence. *Trust me. A small loss can mean a big win...*

A coordinated volley of three radiation guns killed a group of Ilts and two Orgh, and caused severe damage to another tower complex in the Shining City.

"Target hit," commented Ralmanin, the navigator, as he pulled up the *Peskar-XXV* to get a better view. He came from Arkon, but not from any of the influential families.

"Look there!" Dinghy commander Falinas da Andeck, whose great-grandfather had already been an admiral of the fleet, pointed downward. Despite his youth, he was already well on his way to following family tradition and learned a lot from his uncle. Unfortunately, he did not belong to the main line of the house like Agidus, but his talent had already spread. "Is that one of our men?"

"In any case, he wears the clothes of the research corps. What's he doing?" replied the navigator.

The two had gone to the Star Academy together. While Falinas had embarked on a career as an officer, Ralmanin had remained with the navigators—excellent training, but not nearly as expensive

as that of becoming an officer. They had met again on board the *Peskar* three years ago and been an excellent team ever since. No crew had previously complained about the combination of commander and helmsman on the auxiliary craft. The two understood each other without many words.

The *Peskar-XXV* raced through the streets of the Shining City, which had a certain charm even in daylight, but was not nearly as beautiful as at night. Ralmanin left the sixty-meter-diameter auxiliary craft in the air. “Shall we take him on board?”

Falinas nodded. “Yes. Either we save him and get an award for it, or...”

“Or what?”

“I don’t think there is an or. We are the only Arkonides on this world.”

Ralmanin confirmed. Falinas, as usual, was right. Kedhassan was inhabited only by large talking insects and strange giant rats.

“We’re going down,” Ralmanin announced.

“Three men in the ground air lock!” ordered Falinas. “Take on the passenger. Be careful, please; it’s an old man, probably from the research corps, forgotten here by the last commission.”

Soft laughter sounded, then came the all clear message.

“It worked!” whispered Dhargan, nodding grimly. “No trap?”

Tatiana Michalovna shook her head. “They have no idea.”

With a crazy scream, Morry jumped out of the cover they had found among some debris. In this respect, the ruthless campaign of annihilation of the Arkonides had been an advantage. The other Ilts also got up and ran off or teleported.

Crest ducked to the side when Morry catapulted past him into the middle of the air lock and immediately fired both weapons. Screams sounded, then there was silence.

“Come!” shrieked Morry. “Come!”

“Forces into the ground air lock!” shouted auxiliary craft commander Falinas. “Needle pistols and thermo-beamers! Use combat robots!” His voice resounded everywhere on the *Peskar-XXV*. He saw with widened eyes the shots from the air lock room and next to it a picture of the surroundings. “These beasts are trying to enter! Defensive shields!”

“They are already within the smallest defensive shield limits,”

came the message from Kala, who acted as the first officer on the auxiliary craft. The flight to Kedhassan had been her first mission. It was supposed to be routine, but everything had gone wrong. “If we shut down the shields, more could follow. We have to fight them the old-fashioned way.”

“We need to pull up!” recommended Ralmanin.

“Surely we can cope with some giant rats!” said Falinas. “And I want to get my hands on that old man. If he’s in league with those critters, he’ll live to regret it.”

“Are you sure?” asked Ralmanin, who for a moment had forgotten the distance between their ranks. “I shouldn’t pull up?”

“Not as long as one of those beasts is still on board!”

The small bay behind the lock quickly filled with Arkonide soldiers and combat robots.

“How many men does such an auxiliary craft have on board?” asked Michalovna, who had equipped herself with a thermo-beamer from one of the fallen Arkonides. It was a weapon that could be roughly compared to a laser, but rather than using light from the visible spectrum, it used infrared rays that made the barrel an ultra-hot beam. At the same time, a little normal light was emitted as a kind of tracer ammunition to make the beam visible to the observer.

Even in continuous fire mode, however, no continuous beam was emitted. Instead, the shots came as rapid pulses, comparable to a machine gun. Since this consumed a lot of energy and the heat output was enormous, almost no one used that setting.

“I guess if not too much has changed, about thirty soldiers plus ten crew members,” replied Crest, who was pulled into the air lock by Ogre-214. He seemed more relaxed than in the days before; the painkiller actually seemed to give him strength. “And a few combat-ready multipurpose robots.”

“Just let them come!” cried General Dhargan. “Ilts: fire!”

Nurghe smoothed his fur. He was not carrying a weapon. “I’ll leave that entirely in your capable hands, General.”

It was horrific.

Within a very short time, the temperature rose dramatically due to the thermo-beamers being fired in the air lock. Many missed shots ricocheted off metal surfaces and whizzed through the room as cross fire. Despite all the negative effects, this was also the luck

of the Ilts: the Arkonides could not safely fire randomly because they would have endangered themselves and the spaceworthiness of their auxiliary craft.

The Ilts fought valiantly, but their weapons were only effective against the Arkonides fighting behind defensive shields when two or three fired at the same time. This allowed them to generate so much energy that the counterforces of the shield were no longer sufficient to neutralize it.

In the air lock, it was getting hotter and hotter, as none of the fighters thought of using their weapons sparingly. Both parties fought with desperate courage because they felt that they had no mercy to expect.

Between the thermo-beams, hollow steel needles buzzed through the air, filled with all sorts of numbing or deadly products of modern pharmacy. At first, the Ilts died, but then one Arkonide after another, and the more of them that fell, the better equipped the Ilts became because they immediately took up arms and exchanged them for their weak hand weapons.

Ricle was one of the first to die from a ricocheted thermo-beam.

"We can't do it!" whispered Dhargan to Nurghe. The air burned in his mouth, barely reaching his lungs, it had become so hot. "Help us!"

"I'm not going to touch a weapon," Nurghe replied. "I trust Plofre."

Dhargan stared at him angrily. "You're an idiot."

Nurghe looked at Crest with his big brown eyes: "I'm not going to kill. You should understand that. No Ilt should kill."

"No Ilt should die!" shouted Dhargan.

"Yes," said Ogre-214. "It's enough."

He grabbed the general and quickly pushed him behind him. At the same moment, a thermo-beam burned through his thorax.

The Orgh was dead before he hit the ground.

"Ha! Eight Ilts and one Orgh!" cried Falinas triumphantly. "And only four of our own. All in direct combat."

"Eight more Ilts remain, an Arkonide, an Arkonide-like one, and the lizard," Kala recalled.

"We are taking the Arkonide prisoner."

"Let's pull up," Ralmanin asked.

"Wait!" Falinas established a connection with the commander.

“Distract the beasts, let them in. And then wipe them out with a few grenades. That’s the fastest way.”

Kala smiled at him. She seemed to like his plan.

The black Ilt growled and pushed his foot against the dead body of the Orgh.

“Eight against fifteen,” whispered Dhargan. “Not good.”

“Sixteen. I count ten soldiers and six robots,” Nurghe added.

“Fifteen,” Dhargan growled, shooting the Arkonide who had killed Ogre-214 in the head. His superheavy weapon easily cracked the light protective shield and killed the man immediately. The Ilts only had this one weapon, a prototype of the Orgh’s, which they had stolen at some point. Unfortunately, one shot cost so much energy that it took the weapon a few minutes to recharge.

“The Arkonides are very sure of victory,” whispered Michalovna.

“But we will win,” Dhargan said. “For us and for the beetles, even if they don’t deserve it.”

He stripped off his two arm splints with a facial expression that the telepath would never forget. The Arkonides had made an enemy that they shouldn’t underestimate.

“I wish I had a valid high-rank command code,” Crest whispered. “Maybe then I could get the Arkonides to stop fighting. Just look at the victims... They have no idea that they’re wiping out an intelligent people! If the Emperor knew that...”

Trker-Hon gave a barking laugh. “Such qualms are out of place. What’s happening, must happen. In the end, the oppressed always turn against the oppressors. Learn from history, Crest! You’re taking part in it right now.”

Tatiana Michalovna shot at a combat robot, which immediately retreated. “Move back a bit!” she recommended. “We can’t fight and protect you at the same time. Stand there in the back, toward Nurghe.”

The mousebeaver, who had gone to the edge of the air lock and was keeping a sharp eye on the terrain outside, gave a friendly whistle. “Yes, come to me. I promise you’ll get to see something soon. If Plofre is right...”

Dhargan and Morry pushed forward side by side, their flanks covered by Limben and Cerly. Behind them came Noru and Krume with more weapons. Three or four combat robots exploded under

the constant fire from the Ilts, and thanks to the modest telekinetic powers of Noru and Krume, the Arkonides in the hall were unable to activate the triggers of their weapons or take more shots.

But the two Ilts were already panting with exhaustion; their abilities had never been intended for fighting. If they did not achieve a decisive victory soon, it would end badly for them.

Suddenly, Morry stopped and sniffed the air. “No,” she whispered. “No.” Tears welled up in her eyes. “No!” She turned around. “No!”

Dhargan, horrified, tried to stop her, but the Ilt broke out of their small formation. Again she shouted, “No!”

Full of horror, Dhargan saw one of the Arkonides hurling five egg-sized explosive bodies at them with a single throw. Thermal grenades!

This was the end.

Morry sensed him long before she could see him. It was him, there was no doubt about it.

“No!” she whispered, lowering her arms.

His voice came out of nowhere and gently caressed her thoughts. *It’s you*, he whispered tenderly. *I missed you, mother*.

She looked in the direction the voice was coming from. “No!” *Orn…you’re alive… I almost didn’t believe it anymore.*

You are also alive, whispered back his disembodied voice. *I would recognize you anywhere.*

And then there was a soft bang, and he appeared out of thin air. He wore a number on his fur, but she didn’t notice it. It was her son!

“How did you escape?”

“The bugs released us,” he said. He waved one hand and the thermal grenades flew back to the Arkonides, where they immediately exploded. “And now we’re taking this ship. My friends are everywhere. We will win.” He stretched out his hand to her. “Are you coming, mother?”

Falinas saw his own people pass away in the fire of the thermal grenades. “We have to get back in the air!” he shouted.

“Yes.” Ralmanin gasped and grabbed her throat. “What about everyone…”

“Ral!” The auxiliary craft commander did not understand what

he was seeing. His navigator and best friend got up, choked, staggered—and collapsed dead. What was going on?

"Commander!" cried Kala. "Take cover!"

He looked over at her and noticed how she fell over. Two of those oversized rats had somehow made it to the headquarters and killed them, even if he couldn't explain how. He pulled his weapon out of its holster, aimed, and shot in a fluid movement that had been practiced thousands of times.

He hit one of the beasts directly in the chest. Actually, he had aimed at the other, larger one, but the small one had practically run right into his shot. Before he could pull the trigger a second time, he felt his tongue suddenly become independent and slide into his throat. Horrified, he grabbed his mouth, but it was too late.

He...

...couldn't...

...breathe.

The Ilt with the number 8/7 and the sad eyes teleported them to headquarters. "The ship is in our hands," he reported.

Crest saw the corpses of the three Arkonides and swallowed heavily. None had external injuries, but all had turned bluish as if they had suffocated.

Nurghe looked at Morry's body long and thoughtfully, then looked at 8/7, and finally looked away as if to avoid any conversation.

Michalovna pushed him psychically, but Nurghe blocked her. *Leave me be. This is none of your business.*

"You know what your mother has done?" asked General Dhargan, waddling through the headquarters with a look that seemed to say "Who needs all this?"

8/7 did not look at him. "Is that all?"

Nurghe turned to Crest. "You know how to fly such a ship?"

The Arkonide nodded, confused. "Yes, sure, but..."

"We're going to leave you now," Nurghe said. "Have a good journey wherever your path takes you. And when you leave Tramp, look back!"

"We will all go," General Dhargan affirmed.

"You can't stay on Tramp," Crest said emphatically. "You will die. Come with us!"

"We don't die," said 8/7, who had picked up his mother's body

and was now carrying it in both arms.

"Plofre called us," Nurghe explained. "We are needed."

With that, the Ilts disappeared.

"We, too, should get out of here," Trker-Hon recommended. "Whatever we were supposed to do here has now become superfluous."

"I'll take command," Crest said. "Or do any of you want to do that?"

20.

Skelir
Berenger IV
October 7, 2036

"What could be better than enjoying the light of the stars?" Skelir involuntarily thought of the words of the young man who had arrested Jenves and him, and had to agree with him. Even a single moment could be Besun.

The Fantan hovered above the surface of Berenger IV, the largest moon of the fortieth world of Vega. The nameless place of the largest, most secret Besun. Without an atmosphere in the way, the view into space was breathtaking. On mountain ranges, thick, soft white rays of sunlight painted contours that rushed like silver rivers against a clear, infinite black backdrop. When they glided across the ground, they grew into puddles, lakes, and seas, and where a foot hit them, fine dust rose up, shone in the distant light, and then descended again in infinitely slow motion until it merged with the shadows.

In retrospect, it seemed like a miracle to Skelir that he and Haggard had been able to come to an agreement so quickly.

After Skelir had called out, Haggard had come to them. "Yes? Please be brief. The patients have slipped into critical condition since your visit."

Skelir had tried to talk as a human would talk and promised to help the four patients on one condition: "I have to be absolutely undisturbed and need my auxiliary craft."

Haggard had looked at him for a long time. First, he needed time to think about it, and he wanted to consult with a colleague, a marshal. Skelir, who had been truthful, had nothing against that. And less than an hour later, he was sitting in his craft, the four former Besun on board. How could Haggard trust him so easily? He didn't seem like a fool. Did he know nothing of the truth?

Well, that's how it should be. Each nation had its secrets, and as

long as those of the Fantan were kept secret, Skelir would be able to sleep peacefully. What did Jenves know? He still heard his parting words because they had hurt him so much: “You betray our entire culture! You are a traitor!”

“I’m saving it,” Skelir murmured. “If it’s not already too late.”

He landed the craft on a plateau that was exactly in the light of Vega. He would not flee; he had no intention of doing so. And he would not abandon Jenves, as his companion feared.

“Release BesunMed!” he ordered the small onboard Positronic

Immediately, part of the cockpit peeled off, and behind it a capsule-shaped robot appeared. One half of its housing was bright orange, the other light green. Its surface was completely smooth; only at the two narrow ends was there a ring-shaped depression from which a wreath of fine threadlike tentacles could be extended.

Every ship of the Fantan had such a robot, which was actually not a real Med unit; it was much too small and equipped with limited computing and storage capacity. It was able to apply wound plasma and spray plasters, as well as disinfect and cauterize. It was unable to diagnose illness, produce medicine, or do many other things. But it wasn’t actually built for that. It was a highly specialized unit that primarily programmed and injected nanomachines.

To the Fantan, Besun meant everything. They secured living Besun by means of cleverly programmed nanomachines against alien or self-theft, kidnapping or escape. If Besun escaped, the nanomachines would trigger an overwhelming escape impulse that would propel the Besun back to the Fantan. And in the case of the four patients, Skelir suspected this had not worked properly. If he was wrong, the four were as good as dead.

Skelir directed the mindless little BesunMed to the four loungers moored in the back of the craft. “Nano-diagnosis!”

The capsule hummed and rose on an antigrav field so high that it could capture all four lounges. An orange beam of light scanned the patients’ heads, followed by a green one.

“Besun programmed. Flawed.” The BesunMed did not say more; its capacity was insufficient to make detailed diagnoses. But at least it was now clear that Skelir was right: the “illness” of the patients was a result of the nanomachines meant to secure the Besun.

Skelir looked at them one by one. Maybe not everyone would survive. The older man, Manoli, had no good chance of survival.

The young one, on the other hand, did. The Ara too. But as far as the Ilt was concerned…Skelir had always feared that such an alien metabolism might be too confusing even for the advanced nanomachines of the Fantan.

"Free them from the nanomachines!" he commanded.

The capsule obeyed immediately. It floated from patient to patient and stroked their necks with its green tentacles. In reality, this movement injected new nanomachines, wonderfully programmed hunters that would be transported to the brain through the bloodstream to destroy all other Fantan nanomachines before gradually breaking down in the blood into harmless organic residue.

After that, it was just a matter of waiting. Skelir did not have much experience with the procedure. Theoretically, he knew how it was done, but in practice, he had never been in the embarrassing situation of having to free a Besun.

It took longer than he had hoped but happened much faster than he had feared. First, the patient he had considered the least resilient opened his eyes.

Eric Manoli sat up. "Where am I?" He saw the Fantan and added, "*Porca miseria*! Not again!"

Skelir wished he had facial expressions like those of humans in order to be able to communicate better with them. "Don't worry, human Manoli. Your time as Besun is over; you yourself have ended it. But you were very sick. An infection that you must have contracted on Myranar. I very much regret that. But as you can see, I was able to heal you."

"I think I remember. It…came all of a sudden. Gucky was with me."

"He, too, is on the road to recovery. Just like the others."

Manoli sat up straight, stretched his back, and looked around. He looked at sweat-drenched Sid. "Are you sure they'll get better?"

"There are no signs to the contrary. However…"

"Yes?" Manoli was suddenly alarmed. Distrustful.

"However, I have to assume that you were all infected. The other two…the girl… Her name was Sue, right? And Reginald, the more compact one? We have to help them too."

"That will be difficult." Manoli closed his eyes. "They're not here."

Skelir tried hard not to show his horror. *I helped you for Sue's*

sake. Because I want to help her. Because she deserves it. "We must notify them."

"I'm afraid it's not in our power. They left...three weeks ago, I think...through a transmitter, and haven't returned since."

"You could go after them," Skelir suggested.

"If it were that easy! The destination to which the transmitter was programmed is no longer responsive. And no other transmitter we know of lists that destination. Perry and his comrades are missing. We are completely helpless."

Skelir heard his blood flaps flutter. *No! Sue missing, Sue dead, Besun destroyed, Besun betrayed, Besun destroyed... No, that must not be the case!*

He said aloud, "That may apply to you, human. Please, let Haggard know that everything is fine. That should calm him down."

Manoli stared at him in confusion. His gelatinous human eyes, as hideous as they were at first glance, had something strangely captivating about them. "But...if Sue and Reg are sentenced to death, everything is most certainly not fine. You can't ask me to lie about such an important issue!"

Skelir shook himself. "I'm not asking that. I think I can help you. My Besun can help you. Trust me, yes?"

"Why would I do that?"

"Because I saved you?" asked Skelir. He pulled up a stellar map of the Vega system and zoomed in on Berenger.

Eric Manoli shook his head. "Give me a better reason. One I can believe."

Stubborn Besun! Luckily, people didn't know how Fantan sighed. *Fine. I have gone far, but not far enough. Secrets will be revealed.*

"Because it's about Sue."

The human hesitated. Then he nodded. "You know what? I believe you. Where are we going?"

"I already said: trust me. Please stay with the others and pay attention to when they wake up. It should be soon."

Skelir's ship lifted off from the lunar surface and set course for another of the six satellite bodies of the giant planet Berenger.

There waited the Besun who could save Sue's life.

Together, the Fantan and the doctor entered the huge cave.

"Thank you!" said Eric Manoli. "Thank you for everything. I

think I know what it cost you."

Skelir turned his cylindrical body back and forth once. "Are you sure you can do it alone? Don't you want to wait for Gucky? Or at least Sid?"

"I'm perfectly able."

"You'll find Sue? Save her?"

Manoli nodded. "Trust me, yes?" he repeated Skelir's question, which the Fantan immediately recognized. The human seemed to understand at least rudimentarily the humor of the Fantan. He had been a good Besun, that much was certain. Thanks to the translator he had injected himself with, the sentence sounded all too familiar to Skelir.

Manoli seemed to be waiting for something. "I will do what I can." He checked the systems of his combat suit. "You hid a really extraordinary Besun under the nose of the Ferrons, didn't you? What will the others say when they learn that you have brought me to this place? To your most precious Besun ever?"

"Trust me. Let the others be my concern." The Fantan snorted. "Save Sue. Go!"

Trust: as simple as it is difficult. And yet a primordial force of the cosmos that must penetrate everything that is supposed to hold together despite entropy. Skelir grinned in his own Fantan way. *We also had to learn this and are still learning. Trust the right thing and you gain a lot. Trust the wrong thing and you lose everything while they win it. Distrust someone and you can have it all. Or lose everything.*

"Human?" he asked.

Manoli turned around. "Doctor Manoli."

"I meant Doctor Manoli," Skelir corrected himself. A good Besun indeed. "I trust you."

Manoli bowed curtly to the stranger and then stepped through the cathedral-gate-shaped, matte white arc of the transmitter.

21.

Agidus da Andeck
Kedhassan
Day four, noon

Slowly, the huge metal disc rose from the dunes of Kedhassan. Powerful gravitational neutralizers made movement possible. The deposited red sand started to slip and trickled down the steel surface like dried blood.

Agidus da Andeck sat enthroned in the commander's chair, smiling; he enjoyed being the first to see the decisive weapon in action. Maybe she would forgive him then. Perhaps he would even forgive himself.

Sometimes he would wake up at night and see her lying next to him. Jamila. His hand groped for her beautiful white body, which she herself despised because it was not perfect. But what was perfect?

At first, he had thought it was their love. But he was wrong. The days had passed, knotted into months, and then coagulated into years that stuck to him like leafy varnish. He had tried to give her everything, but never himself. He had always been too valuable to himself to submit to her. Oh yes, he had loved. Her, himself, his post, his career. Jamila had stopped believing him at some point.

He remembered exactly how it had happened. Jamila had been to Maras with the maids and children, and he had wanted to visit them. She must have sensed how serious he was, and she must have known that something would interfere again. As always.

In fact, something had gotten in his way: his command of the *Peskar*. He had wanted to tell Jamila, but she had already thrown her head back after his first sentence. In this imperious, inimitable movement, for which he had hated her as often as he loved her, she had broken the connection.

Agidus da Andeck had taken over the *Peskar* on its maiden voyage to Maras. But when he had reached the world, Maras no

longer existed. Fifty Methane ships hung in orbit and spit a fire of destruction over the paradisiacal holiday planet that was useless to them. No one had guessed they would make a push in this direction; all of the Empire's highly paid strategists had overlooked the possibility.

No one who had been on Maras when it was attacked survived; the surface was completely destroyed. Hurricanes and earthquakes changed the face of the once-beautiful world long after the Methanes had been driven out.

Since then, Agidus da Andeck had also changed. Everyone believed that Jamila's death had shaped her husband and that he had become intransigent when it came to the war. But they knew nothing. It was not Jamila's death that haunted him. It wasn't even the fact that they hadn't been speaking to each other anymore as loving spouses should. Even that weighed on him lighter than his true sense of guilt.

He had not been so eager to get to Maras because of Jamila. No, he had been looking forward to Utuna, Jamila's maid.

I will avenge you, he thought. He would be the one who brought the weapon, with which the Methanes could be destroyed and brought to their knees, to Arkon.

And his ghosts would forgive him.

Long rows of colored lights betrayed which systems were on: blue stood for the generators that protected the World-Splitter with strong force fields, since its material armor was almost ridiculously thin. Turquoise symbolized the offensive part of the weapon system and claimed the largest number of indicator lights, while white showed the available power of the preservation field. Both values had to be the same so that the divided object was not completely destroyed. Green stood for life support, orange for sensors, yellow for communication, red for the antigravity drive, purple for the field engines of the sublight drive, and violet for the translight drive.

"It's amazing that such a weapon can get by with so few personnel," Andeck mused. "Even if you need more than two arms for it. Set course for Suleys, Orgh!"

"Confirmation of command execution." Gal-Enn shifted some sliders until there were more purple than red lights. He reached for a ball floating freely in the air with numerous grip recesses, as if it

were intended for a multi-fingered hand. When the World-Splitter had penetrated the force field that had held Kedhassan's atmosphere until now, a holocube had formed around the hovering sphere, in which the Ked system appeared as a miniature image. A pulsating orange dot marked their current position. Foreign characters appeared.

"An automatic transcription has not yet found any basis for trouble-free application, but I have made a lower-ranking priority classification." Gal-Enn tapped on a stylized white planet with a free hand, and it was immediately surrounded by an orange circle. "The relative nonnecessity is based on the high degree of intuitive control."

"Do not bore me with a catalog of your limitations, from which you try to make virtues, but follow my commands! The stakes are high—for you and the Empire."

How could an Orgh ever forget that?!

"Show me a real-time holo of our target world!"

Gal-Enn controlled the World-Splitter by touching the floating sphere through the Ked system, while Shaftgal-Xarr fed the sensor data into the main holo. The Orgh felt more than ever like slaves to the Empire. Yes, Gal-Enn understood that the Arkonides were acting out of absolute necessity. All their people would perish if they lost the war. It was a full-fledged primary collision, and any action that took the conflict to a lower level was legitimate. The Orgh would do the same.

All they lacked was a way to avoid this collision. The existence of their people had to be secured, and if they had to assemble a planet-destroying superweapon, so be it. Nothing was as important as the existence of Orgh civilization.

You must not be distracted, said Shaftgal-Cull telepathically as he regulated the engine's output.

Forgive me. If we fail, we will end up like the Ilts as useless instruments belonging to the Arkonides.

Then we must not fail. Not again. Not like the fake commission.

I'm afraid that's septenary, Shaftgal-Xarr said.

You don't believe in the mercy of the Arkonides anymore? scoffed Shaftgal-Cull in reply.

Didn't you pay attention to what was happening on Kedhassan? Gal-Enn asked indignantly. *Without their own primary or at least*

secondary collision, the Arkonides have decided to cause a primary collision with the Ilts. They are too foreign for us; we cannot understand them!

Suleys showed up on the main holo, a glacier-covered world where all life, if it had ever existed, had long frozen to death and lay buried under miles of ice. For Gal-Enn, it was just a world like many others.

"The arrival in orbit above Suleys will take place in a few minutes," he announced. For Kedhassans, the ice world was only a tiny step away from deep space.

"Give me a status report!" demanded Andeck.

Gal-Enn showed him how more and more turquoise lights had appeared. It would have been much faster if the number of white lights had not needed to be increased at the same time, but this step was absolutely necessary.

"Has the production of the equipment for maintaining the preservation field started?"

"The completeness of the production process for Suleys-relevant systems has already been documented," Gal-Enn replied.

The World-Splitter could only generate the force field that ensured the cohesion of the two planetary hemispheres and the existence of the atmosphere for a short time. The generators had to be anchored as quickly as possible to the halves of the world, which maintained the energy bell once created, and adjusted by the World-Splitter.

Do you think the Arkonides would preserve Methane worlds? asked Shaftgal-Cull.

I don't think about the Empire at all, Gal-Enn replied. *I am not able to make a qualified probability classification.*

You don't need to fool me. You assume the complete annihilation of our people.

How are we supposed to escape? How can we save our queen who is so far away from us?

Shaftgal-Cull was silent. Everything was getting worse and worse for the Orgh, and every step to save them brought them closer to annihilation.

"You are receiving news from Kedhassan," said Shaftgal-Cull aloud, adding the salutation a little belatedly: "High Inspector."

Agidus da Andeck did not seem to notice the small mistake. "I want to hope, for the sake of the caller's career, that it is relevant

enough to disturb this great moment. We are at a crossroads of history! Put the call through!"

"Commander da Andeck, at last," said a bright voice. Gal-Enn immediately identified the Arkonide: it was the first officer of the *Peskar*, Auriga da Kamar.

"I hope you have a good reason to disturb me!" da Andeck's voice rumbled.

The female Arkonide made a noise that the Orgh classified as laughter—a strangely inappropriate reaction. "Even more than one. It's about the Ilts."

"That's why you're bothering me? Did one of the beasts survive our purge?"

"Just one? Hundreds did!" Auriga da Kamar's voice sounded shrill.

Agidus da Andeck leaned forward in the commander's chair. "Didn't I leave clear instructions? The Emperor will not be amused! You, the combat robots, and the Orgh are more than enough to eliminate a few Ilts!"

"Sir, they are not animals. Or if they are, they're the most sophisticated ones I've ever come across."

"Get to the point!"

The first officer laughed again, this time higher, more shrill than before. "The Ilts are fighting back, Commander! And...they have broken out and are now attacking in turn."

Da Andeck exhaled deeply. "Leave the escapees to the Orgh. Retire to the ship."

"Sir, you don't understand. The Ilts are attacking the *Peskar*!"

The commander slapped the back of an armchair with the flat of his hand. "But enough is enough! You are a representative of the Great Empire of Arkon! Please behave as such! You have a battle cruiser. Use it instead of being scared of a few half-animals! They're not methane breathers!"

The officer swallowed hard. "Well...of course. Excuse me. The events of the last few days..."

"We'll talk about it later. Do your duty!" He leaned back in his chair, hesitating briefly. "I trust you," he added before ending the connection. "Are all systems operational?"

Gal-Enn was feverishly looking for an excuse. "Yes," he said.

Glaring sparks raced around the edge of the World-Splitter,

bursting with energy, and there were more and more. Everything was like in the simulation and yet completely different. No simulation had been able to prepare Gal-Enn and Shaftgal-Cull. The enormous speeds, the incredible measurements! Their highly developed, complex eyes perceived the events in a sharpness of detail that was not even remotely available to a humanoid.

Agidus da Andeck could not even begin to grasp the dangerous, destructive beauty of the World-Splitter. The walls of the headquarters crackled as if they were under enormous pressure, as if they sensed what was in the air. A blue-white, dazzling, rotating ring surrounded the World-Splitter, now also visible to the Arkonide. The Orgh clearly saw the energy spheres, separated only by fractions of millimeters, becoming faster every second.

Gal-Enn zoomed in closer to the planet and pressed some of the grip recesses of his floating sphere. Lines appeared on the simulation. The Gal adjusted a little, then he pressed the decisive circuit and Suleys disintegrated into two hemispheres, separated by one huge blade of energy that had existed for less than a single breath.

"Stop the net creation!" ordered da Andeck.

"The cohesion of the planetary halves cannot be guaranteed," Gal-Enn dared to object.

"Really? Is that so?" The Arkonide stood up. "Let's see what happens now."

"Confirmation of execution of orders." Gal-Enn remained cool. Suleys's importance was less than septary.

This is unnecessary, Shaftgal-Cull reported.

Unnecessary? Not if the Arkonides have their way.

He watched the displays. Out there, the last, seemingly inextinguishable heat of the icy planet flowed out of the split core. It was a change of color that was almost reminiscent of Kedhassan: the red glowing magma turned black, the viscous stream solidified and crumbled. No force field held and protected the planet's interior; it also didn't hold its atmosphere to the planet.

The Orgh almost thought they heard the sound of space swallowing the gases, how the ice of Suleys was confronted with the absolute cold of space and burst as the mountains crumbled and were crushed. Suleys died a quick, harsh death; this world did not have to suffer as long as Kedhassan, whose force field simply got weaker and weaker. Before long, Kedhassan would meet its final

end as well.

Agidus da Andeck swallowed hard. “Impressive,” he said, but his voice sounded thin and wrong. Did he understand what he had under his command? What power could he use? “The Methanes have no idea what’s coming...” The Arkonide sounded triumphant.

“Excuse me, but you should listen to this,” Shaftgal-Xarr said.

“What?”

“...emergency. Repeat: the *Peskar* needs help. They are coming. The last air lock...”

“Play the whole message!” the Arkonide ordered.

“I’m sorry. That’s the whole message,” Shaftgal-Xarr told him.

“Not possible! We shall immediately return to Kedhassan. Orgh, get the World-Splitter ready. Full energy on all systems. Force fields, propulsion, weapons!”

“Confirmation of execution of the order,” Gal-Enn said calmly, reaching for the hovering sphere to fly the huge disc back to the planet of the Ilts.

“That’s interesting. We don’t need to hurry anymore,” said Shaftgal-Xarr. “The *Peskar* has taken off and is flying toward us.”

“Show me the footage!” demanded da Andeck.

Wordlessly, the Orgh projected the location data as a three-dimensional schematic drawing.

“Make radio contact!” ordered the Arkonide.

Shaftgal-Xarr operated some circuits. “The *Peskar* is not responding,” he announced.

Da Andeck hit the back of the chair with his fist. “Those are not my people,” he claimed. “They wouldn’t hesitate for a second to answer me. It’s those damn Ilts!”

Gal-Enn bobbed his legs in disbelief. “A manning of a cruiser by those animals...seems impossible to me.”

“This is at least as impossible as the fact that they can obviously fly the *Peskar*. And yet it is so. There can only be one reason they are heading toward us: they want to destroy the World-Splitter.”

“This is a matter of impossibility,” Gal-Enn said. “Our protective shields...”

Da Andeck nodded and stood up. “That’s right. What a pathetic attempt! Those half-animals will die. Let the *Peskar* come closer! And then destroy them. Use the World-Splitter! What was good enough for a planet will be enough for a warship!”

Gal-Enn interfaced with the controls. Lights went out. “Confirm receipt of orders.”

Hear me, siblings, children of the Great Mother. I subordinate the quintary level to the primary goal. My life for the Orgh.

We understand you, said thousands of voices who, despite their distance to Kedhassan, were so close, as if no abyss of black cold separated the Orgh from each other. *You were a great Gal; the queen will hear about it even when we die. We increase your personal fame, your quintary level will not pass.*

Thank you.

And thank you, Shaftgal-Xarr and Shaftgal-Cull. He slowly turned to Agidus da Andeck until he had turned his chest to the Arkonide.

Da Andeck turned his head. “Yes? What else?”

The *Peskar* raced toward them. One by one, the ruby lights that stood for the strength of the protective screen went out, the blue energy indicator for the World-Splitter also dimming.

“You useless, shortsighted insect! Fire now!” roared da Andeck, taking a step toward the control station.

Four chitinous arms shot forward faster than the Arkonide could react.

Yes, our perception of movement far surpasses yours, Gal-Enn thought contentedly while Shaftgal-Cull dragged the Arkonides away. *And that’s what counts now, last.*

The *Peskar* flew over the World-Splitter, which drifted naked and without protective shields through space. The *Peskar*’s energy beams and plasma projectiles left nothing of the sinister weapon of a forgotten people after firing upon it.

The time of blackmail was over. The Orgh were free.

22.

Crest
Kedhassan
Day four, noon

Tatiana Michalovna curled up and gasped in pain.

Trker-Hon grabbed her by the shoulders before she could fall over. “What’s wrong?”

Crest, who was sitting at the controls of the *Peskar-XXV*, turned his head. There was concern on his face.

“It... I just had...a mental contact. A message from the Orgh that was so strong it carried me away with it! Gal-Enn...is about to...”

“Calm down,” Trker-Hon said, pushing her into a seat. “I’ll get you some water. Historical Arkonide beverage dispensers should be capable of at least that,” he added with a murmur.

“We don’t have time. I have to...”

“Gal-Enn is aboard the World-Splitter, isn’t he?”

“He’s supposed to destroy the *Peskar*,” Michalovna whispered. “The *Peskar* with all those Ilts on board. Plofre’s plan must have worked. Did you think that a horde of furry animals could capture a battle cruiser of the Great Empire?”

“I didn’t even think that one day I would have to act against my own people,” Crest said. “Can you put yourself in telepathic contact with the Ilts? They aren’t responding to my transmission.”

“I don’t know if there is enough time or if I can bridge the distance.”

Crest operated some circuits. A milk-white wall paneling displayed a two-dimensional image showing the fearsome weapon heading straight for the *Peskar*.

“Is it supposed to end like this?” asked Trker-Hon. “With the annihilation of an entire people?”

“No,” said Michalovna. “It ends...the same.”

“Impossible!” said Crest. He used the instruments to see the World-Splitter’s force field suddenly degrading. “What’s going on

there?"

"Gal-Enn," Tatiana Michalovna whispered.

A cloud of glowing gasses spread where the World-Splitter had been just moments ago. The *Peskar* raced through, turned, and flew back toward Tramp. A holo lit up, and Nurghe looked at the three time travelers.

"Thank you for your mediation," he said. "Also in the name of Plofre. We will now return and clean the system of other Arkonide craft. When we have done that, we will start negotiations with the Orgh. But we wish you a safe onward journey. Maybe one day the stellar winds will bring us back together." He turned away as if he wanted to end the connection. At the last second, he stopped. "Before you leave our system—and I'm sure you'll want to leave—you should heed my advice from earlier and look at our planet. It's worth it. Perhaps then you will understand..." With those last words, the connection was terminated.

"Crest? Can you bring up a live image of the planet?"

Crest's fingers skillfully wandered across the control panel. "I just have to feed in some location results. Then...just a second. There must be a mistake."

The Arkonide leaned forward and shook his head. Again, his fingers slid over the control panel, more frantically this time. And again he shook his head.

"What is it?" inquired Trker-Hon.

"I'll show you." Crest's voice was controlled.

From space, they now understood what a secret Kedhassan—or Tramp—had been hiding all along.

"We didn't get it, but there were clues," Crest whispered.

The sun, which seemed stationary, the sudden day-night changes, the flickering celestial lights—they had suspected that Tramp had no rotation of its own, but they had overlooked the crucial point, as obvious as it was: the World-Splitter. They hadn't wondered why it had been on Tramp, of all places. And now they saw it: Tramp was no longer a planet in the strictest sense. It was surrounded by a shell of energy, without which the world would have had to accept its death long ago. The home of the Ilts was only a hemisphere! The planet had been cut in the middle and stabilized by means of an energy field that balanced out its tectonic structure and prevented the atmosphere from escaping.

“I’m afraid we’re seeing the penultimate experiment of the World-Splitter before us,” Crest said. “After that, the unknown builders or their opponents must have left or hidden this weapon on Tramp as the location of their last mission. Until the Orgh and the Arkonides found it again.”

“What a fascinating technology,” Trker-Hon said thoughtfully. “Just look at the structure of the protective field. Who knows how many centuries it’s kept Kedhassan—Tramp—stable?”

“It would certainly be worthwhile to examine it.” Crest’s eyes lit up. “A fascinating research project.” But where had the second half of this world gone?

Michalovna clapped her hands to attract the attention of the two elderly scholars. She pointed to a monitor filled with all sorts of characters.

“We will have to leave all those mysteries behind us. We’re getting visitors.”

“I see,” said Crest after a quick glance.

In the next moment, the structure buttons failed. At the same time, like ghosts from empty space, six huge spherical battleships flew in, falling from the heavens. Arkon had sent support to the unfortunate da Andeck! Too late for the commander and too late for the World-Splitter...

Five of the steel giants immediately set course for Tramp and the *Peskar*, whose crew did not seem to have noticed the danger yet because they were busy hunting auxiliary craft.

“Send a warning to the Ilts immediately!” shouted Michalovna.

“There’s no time for that,” Trker-Hon said. “Crest has enough to do with getting us out of here safely.”

The telepath looked at the location indicators. The sixth battleship was approaching them. Someone tried to make radio contact.

“Get out of here!” she whispered. “We can’t possibly answer.”

Crest’s hands ran over the controls. “You’re right. We cannot explain what happened here. Maximum acceleration, all additional energy to the protective shields. Prepare blind transition.”

The *Peskar-XXV* suffered a heavy blow, forcing Trker-Hon and Michalovna to grab hold of nearby consoles.

“What was that?” the telepath asked.

“They opened fire on us,” Crest replied. “We need a few more seconds.”

“We might not have that much time!” Trker-Hon hissed. “Arkonide battleships are known for their firepower and accuracy.”

“I’m pinning all my hopes on the crew of the battleship trying to shoot us lame and interrogate us,” Crest confessed. He entered some other data into the controls, and suddenly the *Peskar-XXV* flew some unpredictable flight patterns. Meter-thick jet paths hissed past them, some so dense that the heat was already nibbling on the shell and causing the coating to bubble.

“Crest!” cried Michalovna.

The old Arkonide closed his eyes. He looked like a man who had found peace with himself.

The battleship was getting closer and closer.

“Transition, now!”

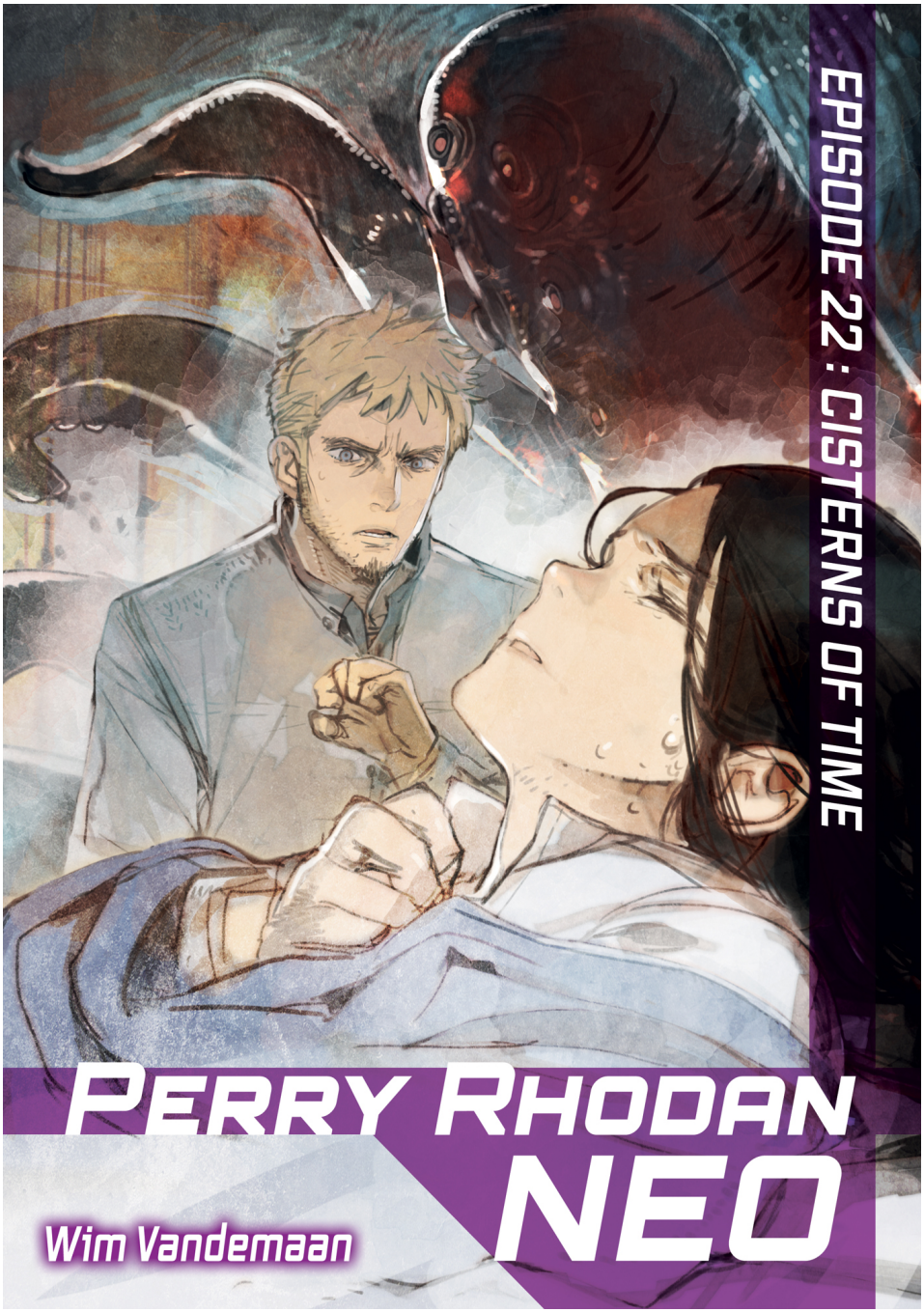
Admiral Goslo da Shavino was seething with rage. He had come too late because he’d had confidence in the man who had once been his son-in-law. Whoever was responsible for the Kedhassan disaster had disappeared.

High Commissioner Harlan da Shavino, his father, was dead. Like Jamila. Like Agidus da Andeck. Like numerous careers. Like the chance of victory that the World-Splitter had promised.

The *Peskar* was gone. The only trace of it was the auxiliary craft, which was obviously no longer occupied by Arkonides. The fires of the warship reached into nothingness. Where the auxiliary craft had just flown, there was now a yawning emptiness.

The *Peskar-XXV* had escaped...

But where to?


EPISODE 22 : CISTERNS OF TIME
PERRY RHODAN
NEO
Wim Vandemaan

1.

Rhodan's Descent

Perry Rhodan stepped out of the transmitter. He took a few steps into the room's vague darkness, then stopped. For one fleeting moment, he experienced a kind afterimage: he saw the remnants of the destroyed island of Rey; the catamaran in which they'd fled the island; Alrad, the Superior; the mysterious scout; and finally, the arched transmitter that the scout had summoned to the catamaran's deck at Rhodan's request, through which Rhodan had just stepped.

Slowly, the scenes of Reyan faded away. His eyes adjusted to the diffuse murkiness. A few displays on the transmitter glowed amber. They were the only light sources in the room and emitted only a dim sheen. A few meters from the transmitter, there was only darkness. He shivered. The air was cold; it tasted empty and thin. Breathing was difficult.

The transmitter had exchanged one reality for another. The tart aroma of the ocean was gone altogether. Wavering light flickered.

"We're in a cave," he heard Chaktor say behind him.

Rhodan nodded and turned around. The Ferron had come through the transmitter with him and was still standing near the archway. The inside of the archway began to gleam, a dark gold or imitation gold leaf as seen in the backgrounds of old Russian icons. Only this luster had no physical presence, and the figures that stepped out from it were not holy ones: Thora and Ras Tschubai appeared, the Arkonide pale as snow, tense and attentive, and the human, dark-skinned, athletic, and immediately alert.

Right after them followed Reginald Bull and Sue Mirafiore, Bull's hand resting lightly on Sue's shoulder.

"Can't say I'm a fan of vanishing cabinets," Bull said, shuddering. "Put me in front of the people who built these trick boxes, and I'd have a thing or two to say to them, believe me."

"Same," Rhodan agreed.

They waited, but no one else came. The transmitter switched

off.

"Where's Lossoshér?" Bull asked with a puzzled look at Chaktor.

The short, compact Ferron laughed just as he often did, resoundingly and for no reason that humans could discern. "I'm not Lossoshér's keeper," he said. Then, in a more placating tone, "I don't know where he is."

"Where are *we*?" asked Sue. She was breathing noticeably quickly, as the others were too by now.

"No idea," Chaktor replied.

Rhodan and Bull exchanged a nod of agreement, then began a systematic search of the cave walls for an exit. They moved in a slow clockwise rotation, carefully feeling around.

"Perfect," Bull said after a while. "As in, perfectly sealed off."

"The transmitter had to have gotten in here somehow," Tschubai observed.

"No doors or air vents," Rhodan said. "It's not that big a space either. The air won't get any better."

They tried to activate the transmitter and recalibrate it, but their efforts ended in failure. Lossoshér, the elderly Ferron transmitter guardian, was the only one among them with even a rudimentary understanding of these devices. But he hadn't materialized.

Why not? Rhodan wondered. *A technical fault? Or did the scout hold him back?*

He turned away from the device and cast a glance at Tschubai. "Ready to make an attempt?"

The tall man nodded. "I'll try on my own first and look around."

"Let's not waste energy," Rhodan disagreed. He offered his hand to the teleporter and Tschubai grabbed it. His face was already gleaming with the strain. He took a few quick breaths in a row, then jumped.

The first glance was enough to reveal that they were no longer on Reyan, the water world. Rhodan now stood in the shadowless glare of Vega as if in the abstract, as if inside an overexposed hologram.

Tschubai still hadn't released his hand. A few tentative breaths had already shown that the air here was no more dense or

oxygenated than in the cave.

"Back?" Tschubai rasped.

"Yes," Rhodan said. "Jump back! Get the others!"

"We'll suffocate here," Tschubai objected.

"Here, maybe. In the cave, definitely. If it comes to that, you won't be able to bring them outside anymore. And no one'll come to help from out here."

"True. The transmitter mountain doesn't look like the center of the local tourist industry."

Tschubai let go of Rhodan and jumped.

Rhodan breathed in as deeply as he could. He narrowed his eyes tightly. He was standing high on a steep, stony hillside. The flat terrain at the foot of the hill stretched seemingly endlessly into the distance, rocky and littered with boulders. But Rhodan thought he could see a tightly packed green spot some distance away, and within it, even more promisingly, a patch of shimmering blue.

Water.

If he was reading the shadow being cast on this distant green oasis correctly, it was inside a caldera—a crater in the landscape caused by volcanic activity. The caldera's size was tough to determine; it could be ten, maybe twenty meters in diameter, and if they were lucky, it lay somewhat deeper than the surrounding terrain. There, the air would be more breathable.

The way was long, however, and the descent would be anything but safe. Rhodan could see some expansive snow or ice fields that they'd have to cross, with no real possibility of going around them. Were there cracks in the ice? Fissures beneath the snow covering? Perhaps. Certainly, none of them were equipped for a trek like that. And what was keeping Tschubai?

Just then, the teleporter returned from the cave, Bull and Sue in hand. With horror, Rhodan registered how drained the athletic man already looked, even though Sue would have assisted with the jump using her own paramental powers.

"Well?" Bull asked.

Rhodan pointed to the crater. "We have a goal. Our next problem's going to be water. There's water there."

Bull shielded his eyes with a hand. "If that's really a lake down there, it's not exactly nearby."

"Afraid not," Rhodan said.

Tschubai had pursed his lips and was audibly drawing in air. He

needed almost five minutes; only then did he jump again.

When he reappeared nearly a quarter of an hour later, Thora and Chaktor in tow, he silently sank to a crouch, then rolled onto his back. His breathing made a whistling sound.

Bull's breathing, too, was fast by now, and getting faster. "Where have we ended up?" he asked with a glance at Chaktor.

The Ferron pressed his thumbs together, perplexed. "Vega looks smaller here than it did on Reyan. But we're not on Ablon. The stone there is iron red, and..." He looked dubiously at the firmament. "The sky is greenish blue. It's not Carpa either. And on any of the worlds farther out, we'd have suffocated already."

"Won't be long," Bull groaned.

"Are we still in the Vega system? Is that even Vega?" Rhodan inquired.

"Of course," Chaktor said, but his voice held a hint of uncertainty.

What if they'd been flung through time again, maybe onto Pigell or Reyan in the distant future when they were deserted, depopulated like the other planets?

There was one more possibility, of course. Back on Lannol, hadn't Kerlon spoken of Vega's tenth planet—and hadn't the Bastion's Positronic confirmed his assertion? A world that had originally orbited between Rofus and Ablon?

Rhodan said, "Then I think we're on Vega X, the missing planet."

Bull held Sue by the wrist and pulled her behind him, catching her when she stumbled. She was stumbling more and more often.

Tschubai hadn't yet recovered from the effects of his jumps, and the environmental conditions were worsening his overall state even more. Chaktor was groaning. Thora was silent. As trained astronauts used to low pressure, Rhodan and Bull were coping with the thin air best. The atmosphere was as thin as at about seven thousand meters on Earth—the death zone of the highest mountains. Humans could only survive for a short time in those regions, and only after thorough acclimatization in advance.

They, on the other hand, had been suddenly thrust into such a zone. It wouldn't take long for serious side effects to manifest. Total exhaustion. Delusions.

Sue needed a break; Bull had tried to carry the girl's almost

childlike form but had given up after a few steps. Now she was sitting there, her arms stretched backward, her head facing upward with a wide open mouth. Her lips were blue.

Thora stumbled after a few steps, then agreed to the repose with a silent nod. She crouched and Rhodan sat beside her.

"How are you doing?"

"Fantastic. How long until we reach a better environment?"

Rhodan looked past her to the green and blue patch deep below them. "I don't know."

"Give me an estimate."

"Three hours."

Her smile was undoubtedly supposed to look mocking. "I said an estimate, not a comforting story." She gasped for breath. "How long really?"

"Seven hours. Maybe eight. Or ten."

"Too long," she said.

He nodded. Was he mistaken or was her skin, far too pale under this sun, already starting to redden? He slipped off his jacket, then took his shirt off and offered it to her.

She took it without comment, lowered her head, and laid the shirt over it so that it both covered her neck and hung over her face like a curtain.

Rhodan put his jacket back on. "Ras?"

Tschubai didn't react. He'd rested his forehead on his drawn-up knees and appeared to be sleeping. His cheeks were quivering barely perceptibly.

"I have a headache," Sue moaned. "It's pounding. Pounding me into pieces."

Bull put one hand on the back of her neck and massaged her cautiously. The other, he ran across her chest, always near the heart. He looked pale and drained.

"I'll get help," he said. "I'll rest up a little, then I'll go."

"No," Sue said. "No, no."

Rhodan got up. He had to fight a wave of vertigo. He saw flashing and sparks before his eyes for a moment. Then he was standing steadily. Squinting, he stared into the distance. "I'll go," he decided.

Thora imitated a smile. "And where's this help supposed to come from?"

"There's not only water down there. I think I see buildings.

Streets. A settlement."

"Naturally," Thora said. "A settlement, as if by magic." She grabbed Rhodan's lower arm. Her fingernails dug into his skin through the material.

"It's a settlement," he repeated. "Ferrons. They'll help us."

Thora clawed even tighter, then released her grip. She licked her lips but didn't say anything.

Rhodan set out.

Half an hour later, it was no use anymore. He was wheezing, leaning with his arms on his knees, and trembling all over. The thin air was making him lose a lot of liquid through his mouth. He knew that his blood was gradually thickening. That syrupy blood soon wouldn't be able to supply his narrow blood vessels anymore. Then he'd go numb in his fingertips and toes. Without toes, he'd struggle to walk.

He straightened himself up and took the next step. His feet were getting heavier and heavier. He barely managed thirty steps before he had to rest again.

"Thirty-one," he counted out loud. He was counting his steps. He'd made it to twenty-five without too much issue. After that, he'd had to force himself with every step. One after another. "Thirty-three!" he cried. More than he'd bargained with himself. He considered whether to subtract the steps he'd gained from his next target but quickly rejected the idea.

That was how he portioned out his descent. Now and again, he had to trudge through a snowfield. The snow was rarely more than ankle-deep, but that was already a strain. Rhodan was aware that he had to drink a lot; he melted the snow in his hands and slurped it.

"English air," he suddenly thought. "English air." He hummed it and made a song out of it. English air—that was what the Sherpas had called the bottled oxygen the English had brought with them on their first climb of Mount something-or-other. He'd forgotten the names of the specific Englishmen and mountains. Very annoying, but he was more annoyed about the Englishmen and their sheer arrogance in keeping the bottles for themselves instead of sharing them with him.

In protest, he started only taking twenty-five steps at a time. Back then, at least they'd had well-insulated clothes, light gear, silk

underwear, a down suit, and double-layered rubber boots. Fashionable fops. No more than dandies.

"English air, English air," he sang to himself.

"Americans, on the other hand, like to do without suitable equipment, don't they? You're outdoorsmen. Very sporty indeed!"

"It has nothing to do with sport," Rhodan defended himself.

"But the Americans are such outstanding athletes. Especially when it comes to sports no one plays but them: baseball, football."

"Says someone who probably spent his youth playing cricket. Or croquet."

"Experts know the difference. My name's Sandy Irvine, by the way."

Sandy Irvine, Sandy Irvine, Rhodan thought. It fit wonderfully into the twenty-step melody.

Rhodan had to cross through another snowfield. This one was mysteriously dotted with ice towers, like a chessboard and its pieces. One of the towers began to crumble as Rhodan stumbled past it. Then it collapsed in a mass of ice fragments.

Rhodan rested briefly, let some snow melt on his hand, and licked up the water. He wasn't listening to Irvine's babbling anymore. Rhodan had pointed out that Irvine couldn't exist because his Everest expedition had ended in death, and even if it hadn't, nothing and no one, not even the corpse of an ill-fated mountain climber, could make it to the Vega system on foot. Irvine had responded with a few snide remarks and advised Rhodan, "If you think I'm an evil spirit, go ahead and exorcise me!"

"You're a product of oxygen deprivation," Rhodan had replied brusquely.

"Hear ye, hear ye!"

At last, the snowfields were behind him. Vega was still showing no sign of setting. Rhodan wasn't sure if he was freezing or sweating. Putting a hand on his forehead would have cost him too much energy. By now, he was resting after every fifteenth step. During one of his ever-lengthening pauses, he made a discovery. There, where a hint of pale green blended into the granite landscape, stood an unnaturally regular block, a stone square with dark openings and a dark, strangely bulging layer on top. A roof?

A building. A cottage. An indoor space offering protection from the sun, in other words. Maybe there was water inside. Food.

He kept walking, even accelerating to a run, though not for

long. Something was wrong with his eyes. Most likely, all manner of blood vessels had burst. He came to a stop, rested, then went slowly onward.

Blood vessels bursting in his eyes... That was only physical. Worse would be if memory loss set in. Was he already suffering from it? That was easy to confirm. Who had come with him through the transmitter? “Reg,” he said. “Reg and Thora. Reg, Thora, and Sue. And Ras. And...” One more man, he was sure of that. Irvine?

No. Irvine was dead and invisible, which disqualified him completely. Besides, Rhodan didn’t like him. He thought hard. A man who laughed loudly without any provocation. A blue man. Yes, as blue as this face that was looking at him with curiosity, almost worry.

With his fingers, Rhodan tried to find purchase in the joints of the walls, in the balls of moss settled there. The window formed a frame for the face, which lay under a transparent respiratory mask. In the background, behind the face, something metallic shimmered; lights blinked, surfaces lit up rhythmically. Something was there, alien yet familiar.

The face shifted even closer to the windowpane. It was blue—bingo!—but not very masculine. It was female. Her lips were moving and her eyebrows were raised. Her voice said something but it was hard to understand. Something with I, something with O. What was he supposed to do with that? I and O. Cricket and croquet.

“Really sorry,” he managed with great difficulty, “but I don’t play cricket.”

2.

Garrean and the Cisterns of Time

Of all the blazes in the world, Vega blazed the brightest. Its light was the illumination of all.

In his childhood, Garrean had lived with his parents on the edge of the County of Kush, in a bungalow high above Byton Lake. During the day, the lake appeared to be in flames; the stone hollows on its shore glowed with such heat that you had to cover them with layers of Bourinc bark if you wanted to lie in them.

At night, when he lay in bed, exhausted from swimming in the sea and from the heat, his mother would tell him about the bottomless Cisterns of Time. He'd thought, *No matter how black and bottomless they are, they're no match for the light of Vega.*

His father had been a space soldier. Sometimes, his mother had televidded with his father's mother. While they spoke, Garrean's mother would absentmindedly stroke the copper-colored braid reaching to her waist.

They talked about anything and everything, but never about Garrean's father. As if the first word they spoke about him would break the spell that kept him alive out there, on the battlefields in the orbit of Rofus or Reyan.

When his mother left his room, he would always lie awake for a while and muse over her stories. He heard the Chaklan in the depths of their house chanting the *Litany of the Idols' Unity*; some verses he could already sing along with.

One day, when he was still very young, silence had drifted across the lake like a poisonous fog and settled in their house. It was the hour when the Chaklan should have sung, but they didn't sing. Quietly, quietly, to keep from provoking the beast of silence, Garrean had crept to his parents' room. He'd seen his mother; she'd been sitting alone on the edge of the bed, stony like solidified magma. She'd cut off the beautiful braid and thrown it to the floor. There it lay like a dead animal.

Garrean had stopped in the doorway. Through the window, he'd seen the lake, that blindingly white mirror. His mother hadn't looked at him, but she'd noticed his presence. "Yrapad," she had said, "your father. He's plunged into the deepest of the bottomless Cisterns."

Cold. He'd gone cold. At the same time, as hot as standing naked at the height of summer.

"He's dead," his mother had translated, as if he still hadn't understood.

Garrean had turned around, irate, and run into his room. He'd lain on the floor and thought, *Father isn't dead. How can someone be dead if they plunge into the Cisterns of Time? You just can't see him anymore. His calm eyes, his big, big hands. That's all. But when Vega stands at its zenith above the Cisterns on the Most Distant Day, then I'll see him again. Then he'll emerge. Nothing can compare to the light of Vega.*

This far from the planet, the sun had lost anything familiar about it. Its radiance sat in space like a secret divulged to no one. The hissing and crackling in the speaker grew louder. Over the com, Garrean heard a stricken breath, then his secretary's voice. Shim said, "I'm feeling hot."

"Hmm," Garrean replied.

"Miserably hot, even."

"What's your space suit's cooling doing?"

"Cooling me," said Shim. "Otherwise I'd be boiled alive by now. The problem is, it's not cooling me nearly enough."

Garrean could feel the validity of his secretary's words on his own body. Their cooling systems were long since overloaded. The suits' lowest layers, which rested against the skin, were permeated by a sophisticated network of tiny channels in which ice-cold water circulated. Garrean could practically feel the water pulsating in the lamellar system, while the air-conditioning system did what it could to keep the water from bubbling up and evaporating. And all while the cooling unit was on the verge of losing the battle against Vega's electromagnetic torrents.

"I was against leaving the shuttle," Shim reminded him. "I was totally, thoroughly against it."

"Hmm," Garrean said again. "What's done is done."

"What's wrong is wrong," Shim echoed. "What's dead is dead."

“Why did you come with me, then?”

“Yes, why *did* I come with you? Because you ordered me to?”

“Ordered,” Garrean repeated in a skeptical tone. “Why did you follow my friendly recommendation to accompany me outside if you were so scared?”

Vega was immense: an inexhaustible, perpetual, silent explosion of light that gave anyone a good reason for instinctive fear.

“Because I’m more scared of you,” the man confessed.

Garrean laughed silently. For a moment, there was no sound except the rising and falling hissing and crackling in the speaker. “You’re such a wimp,” Garrean stated with no hint of reproach. His helmet’s visor was darkened enough that he couldn’t see anything except Vega. No planets, not even Ambur itself, let alone Shim’s silhouette.

Garrean and Shim had left the shuttle roughly three minutes ago. It couldn’t be long before Ambur would move in front of the sun. Garrean stayed calm.

“We’d have been safe in the shade,” Shim said. “This is a completely superfluous act, governor.”

“Your mother seeking the pleasure of close proximity with your father was also not a *necessary* act,” Garrean remarked.

He heard Shim groan. “You’re a pest,” his secretary said. “Or you have a death wish.”

Again, the governor laughed silently. As a former spacefarer, Garrean felt nothing but awe toward space. Indeed, he feared this immense realm like a man feared a woman who was too beautiful to disregard. Like a woman, space filled life with risks; it threw everyone off the track of their everyday life, opened up a new perspective on all things. Space made everything new.

Shim didn’t understand anything about women. As such, he also didn’t understand anything about space.

“I’ll die now, then,” Shim announced.

“Hmm,” Garrean murmured. “Wait another moment, please.”

Ambur slid in front of Vega’s sea of light. The heat lifted from them like a steel plate. Gradually, the space suit’s visor brightened. Garrean saw the *Pacvass III*, their shuttle, hanging above them. The *Pacvass III* was an old but still elegant spaceship. On the delta-shaped base of the flying wing, he could make out two iron hands. The machines actually looked like oversized Ferron hands, with the angled thumb serving as a small air pressure propulsion unit. The

four fingers on each of the iron hands were repairing damage to the shuttle's heat tiles. Garrean didn't concern himself with that. The iron hands were dependable machines. When their work was done, they'd draw back into their alcoves again.

He turned back to the bigger issue. The enormous orbital mirror assembled in orbit under his aegis was being brought into position and aligned. The robotic collectors had spent months harvesting the orbit. They'd sighted space debris, confirmed its suitability, and brought it to the building site.

The Vega system had debris in droves. The great war of the Dark Age, which had finally been brought to an end a few years earlier by the Thort, whom some called all-seeing, all-knowing, and omnipresent, had left its mark. Naturally, not every piece of trash floating around could serve as a building block for his orbital mirror, and some had to be thoroughly reworked and reshaped to create a precisely fitting piece.

Aside from that, Garrean had managed to siphon off some resources from official and unofficial sources and send them to Ambur's orbit to the tune of several tens of thousands of tonnes.

Now, many months of work were reaching their end. Garrean had scattered soot on the polar regions. And at his behest, the bioarchitects of Karbush had modified Ferron and Amburian bacteria; they'd grown darkly pigmented cell membranes on the microbes. Then these novel creatures had been set down in the polar regions. The darkening of the ice caps through microorganisms and soot would lead to an overall temperature increase; in the greater warmth, the ice would gradually melt, and ever so gradually, a thicker, more breathable atmosphere would form.

Garrean wasn't a big fan of the gradual, however. He was a fan of rapid success. The orbital mirror played a key role in his plans. He would produce data faster and prove that more could be made out of Ambur. At least, if one were Garrean—if one had his vision and his sense of possibilities that lay beyond the noses of Ferrol's bureaucrats.

The orbital mirror would lend decisive momentum to Garrean's thus far rather unimposing project of ferrolforming Ambur—a momentum that would continue long past his term as governor.

"Everything's going according to plan," he heard Shim say. The misery had left his secretary's voice.

“Good,” Garrean said imploringly. “That’s good. Very good.”

The orbital mirror was an impressive structure. Its surface was made of polymer-reinforced aluminum foil. This layer would pool the beams from Vega and focus them on Ambur’s northern polar region, increasing the temperature there by up to six degrees over the next few decades. The ice would melt; streams, rivers, and lakes would form, and Ferron life would be possible in more than just the basins, lowlands, and valleys.

The mirror was enormous. The sheet measured 220 kilometers across. Dozens of interception satellites were already protecting the paper-thin foil from floating space debris.

A space-proof autocamera spun past, gently corrected its course, and directed its lens at Garrean. The governor wasn’t sure if the camera would be able to record his face or was just filming its own reflection. Either way, he put on a confident smile and nodded seriously in the optical sensor’s direction.

The autocamera didn’t transmit live. A live broadcast could have led to responses on Ferrol that were...rather undesirable, Garrean would say. Instead, the homeland of all Ferrons would be blessed with a compilation film later on that depicted the operation.

Garrean spotted it an instant before Shim screamed, “Watch out!” One of the subassembly’s control drives had failed. Instead of braking with a soft counterthrust and inserting the segment into the intended place, it had switched to continuous thrust.

“I see it,” he murmured.

Garrean saw what was happening and what consequences it would have. The segment would shoot through the foil and hit the mirror’s central section, which housed the computer and self-steering system. The mirror would start to teeter, rupture, and in the worst case, even plunge into the planet.

Garrean tried to reach the segment that had become a missile over com and activate its backup system. But the propulsion unit didn’t respond and maintained its catastrophic course.

So Garrean responded.

“What are you doing?” Shim’s voice blared from the speaker.

“Shim,” Garrean said quietly but with the tone of giving an order. “Would you be so kind as to not cause irreparable damage to my hearing?”

“What are you doing?” Shim repeated.

“You can see that,” Garrean said. “I’m accelerating.”

“Leave it!” Shim cried. “The propulsion unit has probably diagnosed its error already and activated a self-destruct sequence.”

“Maybe,” Garrean conceded, unmoved.

“You’ll die,” Shim prophesied.

The jets on Garrean’s space suit practically catapulted him to the mirror. Shortly afterward, he was at the same height as the segment hurtling toward the mirror’s central section. Then he’d overtaken it. Garrean pulled in both his legs and gave the thing a mighty kick. The segment shot past the mirror. Garrean rolled over a few times until he got his jet flight back under control.

“You see?” he said. “No danger.”

At that moment, the segment silently exploded. A piece of the debris burst through the foil without causing any great damage. A sharp-edged piece lurched toward Garrean. The governor threw his arms up in front of his visor. The fragment shredded a part of his left sleeve at elbow height. Garrean felt the drop in pressure and, a split second later, heard the hissing of tiny jets spraying a sealing compound into the hole. But the hissing fell silent, and more and more air escaped. Garrean tried to cover the area with his right hand without much success.

Suddenly, another body was next to him. Shim covered the ripped open portion with his abdomen. Only then did Garrean feel the pain and scream out.

“Everything okay?” Shim asked, no sympathy in his voice.

“Of course,” Garrean grumbled. “What did you expect?”

“You know what I expected.”

“If we’d stayed on board the *Pacvass III*, our project would be at an end now.”

“If I’d stayed on board the *Pacvass III*, you’d be dead now. A hero, but dead.”

Garrean smirked. “What a glorious day.”

They were back in the *Pacvass III*’s cockpit. The com unit showed that Vela Waygen had tried to reach them multiple times.

“Ask what she wants,” Garrean said as he peeled his injured arm out of the space suit.

Shim activated the com unit and established a connection. Something was interfering with their reception. Waygen’s angular and somewhat asymmetrical face rapidly switched from color to black-and-white and back again.

“We thought you two were dead,” Waygen muttered.

Shim gave Garrean a reproachful look but didn’t comment on this remark from his companion’s deputy. Garrean cursed to keep himself from screaming out in pain before finally freeing himself from the sleeve.

“We’re doing great!” he bellowed in the microphone’s direction.

“So I can hear,” Waygen said dryly. “Can I give the Thort an indication of when to expect you back from your little orbital expedition?”

Garrean pushed in front of Shim and looked at the com device’s optical sensor. “Why the Thort?”

“Because he’s here,” Waygen replied with visible pleasure.

“In Karbush?” Garrean asked.

Waygen rolled her eyes. “In Karbush. Where else?”

“And what does he want?”

“To speak with the governor. In person. And without delay.”

“Tell him I’m on my way,” Garrean said, then cut the connection.

3.

Rhodan in the Promised Land

Perry Rhodan felt himself grabbed, lifted up, and then set down again. He struggled against it as much as his depleted strength allowed and pointed behind him, up into the mountains.

"Still five outside!" His voice sounded brittle.

They held his arms tightly, pressed them against his body. Something was pulled over him. All was dark for a moment. Then light hit him again. He heard voices, sounds. Something was closed, clicking in a bright, metallic tone like when magnets collide.

He felt around him with his hands. It all felt like smooth textile of some kind. When he applied pressure to the fabric, it moved back and forth a little, feeling as if the material was sliding against another layer that it wasn't stitched or stuck to. When he turned his head, he could see outside through an oval, palm-sized film, if not very clearly. Maybe his vision was a little blurry or the film was slightly opaque.

Something was quietly hissing. It was a pleasant sound.

Bit by bit, his breathing started to feel easier. He felt the material around him stretch with the increasing air pressure. He breathed deeply, gratefully. It grew warm. He decided he had to be in a hyperbaric room, an inflatable rescue bag, or some other kind of portable pressure chamber.

The outline of a blue face appeared in the left window, shielded by a transparent respiratory mask; the voice said something in the Ferron language, which Rhodan again didn't understand. Unspeakably tired, he nodded weakly to show his gratitude, then closed his eyes.

Then he jumped in panicked terror, pounding against the right wall as hard as he could until the blue face appeared again.

"There are another five. Five people still out there," he cried. He pressed his hand against the window and spread all his fingers. "Five," he called out. "Do you understand? Still another five! Five!"

The face on the other side moved closer to the oval. Rhodan could just about see the person's eyes, and in them, understanding.

"Another five," he heard the voice repeat. It sounded rough, smoky, but nonetheless unmistakably female.

"Five," he said.

"Five," the voice confirmed. "We'll fetch them. All five."

Then he felt his friendly, balloon-like vessel being lifted up and set down again on a flat, hard ground. After a jolt, a rocking and swaying set in, which he gave into in his exhaustion.

He fell asleep.

The first thing he became conscious of was the headache. As Rhodan sat up with a struggle, the nausea followed. He didn't rush himself, breathing deeply several times. Then, eyes closed, he swung his legs out of the bed, felt the cold ground under his bare feet, and let himself be satisfied with that triumph for the moment.

He opened his eyes to find a strikingly bare room with no windows. The door was made of metal and had no handle. The walls were whitewashed and unadorned. The gold-colored blanket that had slipped down to his thighs weighed almost nothing but had retained a lot of his body heat. There were neither tables nor chairs. A camera hung in a wire frame in the opposite corner.

He tried to stand up but the dizziness was still too strong. However, he did manage to keep hold of the blanket as it started to slide off; they had undressed him completely.

Gradually, the dizziness faded. The headache didn't—it kept pounding relentlessly.

With a soft squeak, the door opened. The Ferron who entered looked familiar to Rhodan—the face in the oval, only without a respiratory mask. The mouth that had said "Five."

He looked at her. She was about 1.6 meters tall, quite considerable for a Ferron woman. Her shoulders were wide, her hands conspicuously small. Her face was more round than oval; her copper-colored brows sat above her dark eyes like thin metal arches and shimmered like freshly minted coins. A straight and narrow nose, not very lofty; a large mouth, the Cupid's bow of her upper lip only weakly curved; the groove above it leading to the bridge of the nose was hardly formed. Overall, her face looked flat, almost two-dimensional, and had a unique, understated beauty. Her hair, that same Ferron copper color again, was combed back, out of her face,

and held in place with a variety of clasps.

She closed the door behind her, and Rhodan raised his brows questioningly. She stepped closer but stopped some distance from the bed.

"You and your friends were lucky," she said. Her voice was as smoky as he remembered. "If I hadn't happened to be out on recon, you'd be dead by now."

"Thank you!" he said. "Are the others doing okay?"

"The five?" For the first time, a hint of a smile found her face. "Yes. Not as well as you, but okay. I'm a medic," she said as if to reassure him.

Or to unnerve him? Chaktor aside, Rhodan's group looked different from most Ferrons. Slimmer, taller, and with a different skin tone. A medic would no doubt notice even more differences.

She asked, "What ship did you arrive in?"

He ran a hand over his forehead. What should he say? What might Bull and the others have said in the interim? "I'm sorry. I don't know."

Nothing on her face showed if she believed him or sensed that he was lying. "We can put that topic aside," she said. "If you are—as I assume—an illegal immigrant, and don't want to name the ship or agent that brought you to Ambur, that doesn't matter to me."

"Thank you!" he said again. He had to keep her from continuing her interrogation. He needed to seize the initiative. "My name's Rhodan," he said. "And I'd like it if I could have some clothes on while we talk." He tapped on the blanket.

"Of course," she said. "I'll have clothes brought to you. How will you be paying?"

"Do you take American Express?" Naturally, that was met with a blank expression. "I don't know how we'll be able to pay you. For the clothes, you mean?"

"For the clothes, the treatment, transporting you from the breathless zone to Ganashar, and your overall stupidity."

Ganashar, Rhodan thought. *So that's what this city's called.*

"Even for the stupidity?" Rhodan smiled. "Sounds like it'll come to a pretty hefty sum. I didn't know stupidity had a price tag on Ambur. Although I have to say,"—he laughed despite his headache—"that sounds like a pretty good way to make money."

"Then you'll have to pay off your debt by working," she said.

Rhodan fell silent.

“My name is Eneida, by the way.” She crossed her arms in front of her chest and looked at him. “Your group’s skin pigmentation is quite unusual.”

“We are quite unusual,” Rhodan said, smiling cautiously.

“One of your companions has a particularly large amount of melanin. One of the others, meanwhile, is almost lacking in melanin altogether. Are those mutations? Or the result of targeted genetic engineering?”

“Why do you want to know?” Rhodan replied. “Does skin pigmentation matter in your community?”

“No,” Eneida said after a brief hesitation. “It matters to you. For your work deployments, for example. I’d recommend that the very light-skinned woman isn’t deployed on field operations, or only for limited periods. There’s too great a risk of her being harmed by UVB rays while outside. Parts of her facial skin are burned already.”

“How is she doing?”

“We’re treating her. No need to worry.”

“Thank you,” Rhodan said. “To whom will you make these recommendations, incidentally?”

Eneida smiled. “I have to say, if you and your companions are spies, you’re going about it in a very amateurish fashion. But maybe your amateurishness is carefully honed, and your striking skin tones are supposed to make you seem harmless.”

Rhodan sighed. “Why did you save us if you’re afraid of us?”

“Perhaps I’ll be asked the same question.” She turned around, went to the door, and knocked on it. It was opened from the outside.

“And you’ll think about getting me clothes?”

She turned around again and smiled. “It’s my first priority.”

About half an hour later, a young Ferron woman brought him a finely ribbed pair of tights, some pants made of coarser fabric, shirts, a poncho, a wide-brimmed hat woven from a kind of straw, and light boots. She didn’t introduce herself, didn’t say a word, and gave no indication of leaving the room again. In one hand, she held a kind of walking stick. So he got dressed while she watched.

When he was finished, she asked, “Does everything fit?”

“Perfectly,” Rhodan replied.

“Eneida estimated your measurements,” the Ferron revealed. “I’m Yinye.”

“Rhodan.”

“You’re assigned to me,” she informed him rather casually.

“A free service?”

Yinye gave a light chortle. “We’re going to eat now.”

“Great.” Rhodan put on the sombrero. “I hope I’m appropriately dressed for the occasion.”

“Why wouldn’t you be?” Yinye looked at him, baffled. “Eating is a natural process. How could someone be inappropriately dressed for it? You could even eat naked.”

“No, thanks; dressed is good.”

Yinye turned. She picked up her walking stick and pounded against the door with it. An older Ferron opened the door; she was clad in a worn uniform or livery with gray as the base color. Her right eye was a cloudy green, and in front of her clear right eye she wore a monocle.

They stepped out of the room. Yinye greeted the older woman curtly but respectfully, then led Rhodan through several corridors to the exit and out to the front of the building. The sun must have set a few minutes prior. The light wasn’t so glaring anymore, but it was anything but dusky. Rhodan cast a brief glance across the settlement, across the visible green spaces and steeply rising rock walls surrounding the place on all sides. He thought he could smell the water that had formed a lake in the depths of the caldera.

Yinye had stepped onto the street without pausing and marched forward. With a few hurried steps, he caught up to her. Now and again, she went a little slower, and at one point she stopped altogether. Then she drew air in through her nose and seemed to examine it before finally continuing on her way, visibly relieved.

Two or three times, they encountered some young Ferrons. They clapped at Yinye, evidently as a greeting; Yinye clapped back and gave them a good-natured mocking remark.

The street was narrow, almost an alley. Lampposts stood at regular distances apart, though the lamps weren’t lit yet. Rhodan saw elongated, pear-shaped cloth bags hanging in them. Here and there, lines ran from house to house, stretching across the street with pieces of laundry billowing in the light breeze. The buildings were two or three stories tall, with surfaces that looked like sandstone. The small, round windows resembled portholes on a ship. Above them, protrusions jutted out of the wall, some with pieces of cloth hanging from them that covered the windows. He

kept seeing walls with large faces painted on them, phrases assigned to them with speech bubbles like in a comic book. Rhodan couldn't decipher the writing system.

Yinye had noticed Rhodan's gaze. "The Promised Land!" she said. "Ganashar." She was young and striking, and the enthusiasm with which she pointed to the environment became her well.

"That's what you call this place?"

"Of course," she said, and the astonishment returned to her face. "What else?" He felt a small reprimand in this question.

"Where are we going to eat?" he asked.

"Hedpou's Gastrointestinal Pleasure," Yinye said. She gave him a wary sideways glance. "Why?"

"Hedpou's Gastrointestinal Pleasure, then," he said and smirked. "I've heard nothing but good things."

4.

Guall on the Beam
The Past

He hung in the air, the rope looped two or three times around his wrist and forearm. With his fist, he gave himself extra grip. He could feel his own body weight pulling on his outstretched arm. The rope was hanging from a beam. His body slowly rotated. He made an effort not to thrash about with his feet. With his free arm, he paddled a little. His eyes were covered up—two of his eyes, anyway. They hadn't touched the useless third eye.

The stick hit him on the thigh. He laid his free left arm across that area. The next strike hit him on his unprotected hip. He raised his arm to that location. Then another blow to the thigh. He lowered his arm again.

"Almost like a trained animal," Shenidin said. "Arm goes up, arm goes down. Not bad for a freak of nature."

He let his left arm hang by his side.

"Oho," said Shenidin.

The next strike, more severe than any so far, hit him on the back. He gasped for breath. Helplessly, he swept his left arm backward; another blow, this time to his left forearm.

Now, for the first time, he shrieked in anguish.

"You just have to let go," Shenidin said. "If the enemy's lying on the ground, he won't be hit anymore. Just let go."

Why didn't he just let go at last? At some point he would, so why not now? Shame? Pride? He'd left shame and pride behind like torturous childhood illnesses. So what was the incurable disease in him that forced him to keep holding on even now?

The next strike landed between the shoulders. Amid the pain, he bit his lower lip. An instant later, he tasted his own blood, and smelled it. For one brief moment, the faintly bitter aroma overpowered the fecal stench rising up from the pit they'd hung him over.

“Such a shame to have not just two eyes like a normal person, but three…and still not be able to see a thing!” Shenidin mused.

He heard the others in the cheerful group laughing obsequiously. After all, they were here as servants of her beauty. And to torture him, of course.

He pictured the beautiful Shenidin. Her eyes were the same coppery shade as her hair. Her cheekbones were high; tiny brass particles glistened on her lips. The dark decorative scar on her left cheek depicted an ancient symbol, a hieroglyph: the iron rod of indomitability.

“Do you still want to kiss me?” she asked.

“That would be difficult right now,” he said. He drew in a breath. It pained him to do so. “You’d have to wade through the muck. But personally, I don’t have anything better to do, and I’d be up for it. So come on.”

He heard her screech, then her next blow hit him right on the chin. Against his will, his hand let go of the rope. His arm uncoiled, and he smacked into the waste, sank to his knees, and pushed against the slick floor with both hands.

Laughter.

Slowly, he started to get up and slipped off the blindfold. He looked around. The merry onlookers greeted him with mockery and disgust.

“Guall could swim through the shit a little,” Fethaym suggested in his good-humored bass. Fethaym was one of Shenidin’s current three or four favorites. “Maybe he’ll make a name for himself as the best shit-swimmer far and wide.”

Derisive applause.

Fethaym cast a glance at Shenidin to see if she appreciated his joke. But her gaze remained unwaveringly fixed on Guall. Guall, who was looking into her eyes almost with curiosity.

As he stood up fully, he tried to wipe his hands on his pants, but they were soaked through with the muck, already dripping and unable to absorb even more excrement and liquid waste.

“Looking good,” said Rennark, one of the other favorites from her harem. “Brown is definitely your color. You do yourself proud, shit-stained Guall.” He bowed theatrically.

“Anything looks good on a guy if he’s handsome enough,” Fethaym added. He and Rennark laughed themselves silly.

Shenidin didn’t let Guall out of her sight. She studied him like

an unfamiliar creature or a machine whose mechanisms and functions she didn't entirely grasp.

Guall climbed out of the basin. His shoes squeaked softly and left wet footprints on the ground. Fethaym and Rennark had planted themselves closely on Shenidin's left and right, testosterone-filled bonbons for Shenidin's appetites for night and transgression. She leaned her head sometimes on one's shoulder, sometimes the other's, and wrapped an arm around each man's waist.

Guall slowly traipsed toward them. Shenidin and her two favorites turned around, accomplices in happiness. For them, a wonderful day was drawing to a close. Guall heard Shenidin's laughter.

He, as always, stayed behind. He was good at staying behind, at being left behind. Suddenly, though, still in the protective cloak of her laughter, Shenidin looked back at him over her shoulder, and he realized what she and her friends were really doing. They were fleeing from him.

Many years later, he'd heard that the three had stayed together, even when Rennark had risen to the rank of starship commander. They'd been together when their ship was shot down over Ambur, and they'd ultimately died together.

Later, when women had started being brought to Guall, the Thort, if they stayed and slept beside him, he would gently—careful not to wake them—draw an ancient pictogram on their cheek with his index finger.

Only once had one of them awoken; he'd forgotten her name. She had drowsily opened her eyes, and he'd more felt than seen that she was staring at him in the darkness. "What are you doing? Writing on me?"

"I don't know," he'd said, unsure of why he was lying. It was the hieroglyph of the iron rod of indomitability.

None of the women had ever gotten pregnant. Thort Guall was infertile.

A strange thing to still keep in my mind, thought the Thort, the ruler of the Vega system and thus many billions of Ferrons, before returning his attention to the present.

5.

Rhodan and the Monocled Woman

Hedpou's Gastrointestinal Pleasure was what might be called a dinner theater on Earth—or a karaoke bar. You sat at tiny round tables and looked at a slightly raised stage in the center, which Ferrons stepped onto according to rules Rhodan couldn't discern. They sang songs, gave acrobatic performances, or recited satirical poems directed at someone-or-other. The loudest applause went to a Ferron man who brought three sprightly but scrawny women onstage, wooed them, and, as they proved willing, went into action with them—albeit only in suggestive pantomime. The three older women shouted and squealed with real or playacted enjoyment and left the stage with hands under their baggy tops to indicate pregnancy.

The hero spread his arms wide and declared in a deep, resonant voice, "What's done is done!" He was evidently happy with himself, the women, and the course of the world.

"What's done is done!" came the reply, shouted in chorus.

Yinye loudly called, "Oho!" across the room, then turned to Rhodan and said, "Good, isn't it?"

"Incomparable," Rhodan replied as he ate with great appetite. The cuisine truly was excellent. The waiter had put a dish on the table for eating, and two bulbous glasses along with it, with which they could scoop the drink—a kind of light fruit wine that tasted roughly like fermented apple and pineapple—out of a bowl.

Yinye scooped up more drink than she ate food, and the fruit wine took its effect. "It's nice here!" she shouted. Then she turned around, leaned far over the table, and suddenly brought her face very close to his. She seemed to want to say something, swallowed, coughed, chortled to herself, and then asked, "How's the food?"

"Fantastic." He gave her a conspiratorial smile. "I just can't pay for it."

"Don't worry about that," she reassured him. Her eyes gleamed.

“Will you make your contribution?”

“Of course,” he promised. “But I’m tired. I had a tough day.”

“Yes,” she said softly.

“I’d really like to know how my companions are doing. Where can I find them?”

“In the clinic, I assume. Where I picked you up. And clothed you.”

“No doubt,” he said. “Are we going back?”

“No,” she said. “You’re not going back there. You’re getting your own room now. I’ll take you there.”

They stood up. Yinye swayed slightly. He held her steady and she put an arm around his waist. That was how they left the dining establishment. It had grown markedly cooler, but not cold. The streetlights offered a beautiful, brassy glow.

“The clinic I was lying in—what’s it actually called?” he asked as if lost in thought.

“The Healing House of the Righteous Hand,” Yinye said. “Eneida’s healing house.”

“Exactly,” he said.

Yinye still hadn’t let go of him. She pulled him along, which was fine with him. The street they were walking down looked like a wave made of bricks. It led up and down and up again, bordered on both sides by a transparent balustrade. To his surprise, she took him aside before the street rose up. There, where the street rose up into the first wave, there was a tiny building not more than three meters high.

The door she pushed open was so narrow that he had to rotate his shoulders as he entered. One room on the left, one on the right, and a bathroom straight ahead. She opened the left-hand door. The ceiling sloped down to the ground in an arch like an attic room. Where the ceiling and floor met was a bed, at the top end of which was a little cabinet with a washbasin on top of it. The front wall had a notch-shaped window, below which was a small square cupboard that was quietly humming from inside. Yinye kicked the cupboard and it opened. Rhodan felt the coldness within and saw a few water bottles and what looked like canned food.

“Well?” she asked perkily, and he understood that she was expecting praise.

“It’s all very nice,” he said. “Thanks.” He sank onto the bed.

“Eneida says you’re lucky to be alive,” she said softly.

“Yes,” he said. “Very lucky.”

Rhodan waited more than an hour. No more sound came from Yinye’s room. As quietly as possible, he stood up and left the building on the wavy street. He’d pulled the sombrero deep over his face and wrapped his arms around his body under the poncho.

He had committed some of the details to memory: some building or other, some landmark or other. He was certain of the rough direction. But then came a fork in the road where he didn’t know if he should go left or right. He stopped.

Two young Ferron women approached, roaring with laughter. He pulled his shoulders in, bent over, and avoided looking at them. In a voice that intended to sound afflicted, he said, “Excuse me! Where might I find the Healing House of the Righteous Hand?”

One of the two women briefly gave him the information while passing by, not slowing down for a moment. The clinic was closer than Rhodan had feared.

Rhodan entered unimpeded, and he’d gotten a clear enough picture of the building earlier to know where he was going. Soon, he found the hallway he’d walked along a few hours earlier while following Yinye’s steps with his new clothes on. To his surprise, the old Ferron with the monocle was still sitting there. Was she standing guard? Or did she serve as a nurse? He wondered if she would tell him where Thora, Reg, and the others were.

She looked at him. Her stool slid across the ground a little with a light squeak. “I’m back,” he said. “I came to see how my companions are doing.”

“I smell the Sharsharym,” she said. “I smell if you came to spawn or to feed.”

Rhodan stayed silent.

“Like Yinye. Except I’m old. But I still smell it. And you smell different,” she said. “The clothing doesn’t cover it.”

“I’m sorry.”

She adjusted her monocle and gripped it tightly on her face. “Why should you be sorry for that?”

“How do I find them?”

The old woman cleared her throat for quite a while. “The women are in the blue wing, the men in the Fhernoy wing.” She indicated the directions with her hands.

He thanked her and walked past. She called behind him, “Are you cultivars?”

He stopped and looked around. “Because of our skin color?”

“Your skin color. And the odor of your perspiration.”

“No,” he said plainly. “No one bred us. But our forebears adapted to suit their environments over the course of time.” He considered a moment, then took off the wide hat, walked back, and crouched beside her. Their eyes were at the same level. He said, “I’m new in Ganashar. I’m sure I’ll make mistakes.”

“You’re new in Ganashar?” She laughed a brittle, whistling laugh.

He bent forward a little and whispered, “I don’t even know for sure which planet I’m on.”

“Then you truly have gotten lost.”

“It’s the tenth planet of Vega—isn’t that right?”

“Ambur,” she said. “Where else could you be? You’re on Ambur.”

“Good.” He smiled.

“I don’t know long it will still be good to be on Ambur. There are rumors.”

Rhodan waited, but she didn’t say anything else. He stood up again. “I’m going to visit the women.”

“That’s the way to the men,” she said.

Thora’s eyes were open and looked at him as alertly as if she’d been expecting him. Her face was smeared with a healing paste, a clear gel that exuded a bitter aroma, somewhere between onion and aloe, with a lingering hint of sulfur too.

The sunburn had caused blistering. A second-degree burn.

“Have you learned anything?” she asked in lieu of a greeting.

“We really are on Ambur,” Rhodan said. “The missing tenth planet of Vega.”

“Before it went missing,” Thora said. “Let’s hope it doesn’t disappear in the next few days.”

“No one can have *that* much bad luck,” Rhodan said, sitting down on the edge of the bed.

“That’s what I thought before I met you.”

He smirked. “Flattery will get you nowhere. How are the others doing?”

“Chaktor is better now, but he’s still pretending to be deathly exhausted. He knows that they’ll let him out, and he wants to keep the group from being split up further. Tschubai is better too. Bull

and the girl..."

Rhodan raised his eyebrows.

She said, "The Ferron medics treated us, cured the effects of the altitude sickness, and did what they could for the burns. But those two seem to have complications."

"I'll go and see," he said, worried. He started to get up, but she grabbed onto the poncho to hold him back.

"Before you go: it was close. If you hadn't run into Ferrons, if you hadn't told them about us..."

He waved a dismissive hand. "If you hadn't been kind enough to crash-land on the moon, I'd have had to live out my days as a celebrated astronaut, giving highly paid lectures, appearing on talk shows, going home to a wife and kids every evening—you know how women flock to heroes."

"Like monks to a flame."

"Moths," Rhodan corrected. "Moths fly toward flames, not monks."

She let go of the poncho and shoved him off the bed. "You lousy know-it-all."

Sue Mirafiore's room wasn't under guard either and had no nurse sitting there. He knocked quietly and opened the door. Tschubai was sitting next to Sue. He turned to Rhodan and put a finger to his lips. Rhodan could hear the young mutant whimpering softly.

Tschubai stood up and walked a few steps toward him.

"What's wrong with her?"

"We don't know," said Tschubai. "She seems to be in pain. Or she's dreaming about pain. Sometimes she talks as if she's delirious."

"What does she say?"

"Incoherent things." Tschubai gave a shrug. "It's like she's trying to work through what she's experienced in the last few days."

"What does Eneida say?"

"The Ferron doctor? She put Sue under what she calls a 'light anesthetic.' She's observing the girl and taking care of her. But frankly, she gives the impression of being kind of helpless. She thinks we're strange. Different."

"And Reg?"

Tschubai shrugged again. "He's not conscious yet either."

“Have you seen him?”

“Briefly.”

Rhodan had Tschubai give directions to Bull’s room.

“We’re supposed to start working tomorrow,” Tschubai told him. “Chaktor, me, probably Thora too.” He showed his white teeth in an open smile. “Most likely, this settlement just needs laborers.”

“Maybe. But I have the sense that they consciously avoid technical equipment here.” He told Tschubai about his trip into the city, about the gas lamps.

“You mean, Ganashar’s something like a Ferron Garden of Eden? A home for ascetics, cultural refugees, and apocalypse survivors?”

Rhodan thought back to Hedpou’s Gastrointestinal Pleasure and shook his head. “Ascetics, no way. Apocalyptics or doomsday prophets...I don’t know.” He furrowed his brow. “We’re on Ambur, by the way.”

“On the missing world?” Tschubai pondered a moment. “Maybe we’re the reason the planet disappears. Or will be, anyway.”

“No,” Rhodan said. “We’re not that important. Anyway, I’m going to see Reg. How are you looking? Can you jump?”

Tschubai pursed his lips and nodded. Then they separated; Rhodan went to Bull, Tschubai stayed with Sue.

Bull’s room was freely accessible too. They’d secured him to the bed with leather straps that bound his wrists and ankles. Bull’s eyes were wide open. He was moving his chest, head, and pelvis in torturously slow, circular, ever-repeating movements, as if his body was grinding up some unknown substance. Around him stood a few medical monitoring and supply devices. The Ferron scales were unfamiliar to Rhodan, but there was nothing on them that intuitively gave him cause for alarm.

“Reg?” Rhodan asked quietly. He stepped closer and laid his hand on Bull’s forehead. It was cold and wet. “Reg,” he said again, bending over him.

He found his pulse and counted; a resting pulse of seventy-five wasn’t slow, but it wasn’t worryingly fast either. As he could confirm, Bull’s heart was beating perceptibly and uniformly.

Bull didn’t react to any of Rhodan’s touches. Even as his head rolled around, his wide-open eyes were fixed on a point far beyond the room.

“Reg?”

As anxiously as he'd arrived, he left the room. He considered whether he should speak to Chaktor too, but he didn't want to outstay his welcome in the clinic.

Tschubai was still with Sue. Rhodan told him the way to the house by the brickwork wave. Tschubai listened intently with his eyes closed and his hand on Rhodan's shoulder, then they teleported.

It was dark in the room. Tschubai felt around and sat down on the bed. Rhodan opened the refrigerator and handed him a bottle of water. He drank, and they didn't talk.

Finally, the teleporter stood up and gave Rhodan a curt nod. At the same moment when Tschubai jumped, the door was flung open and a light flickered on. Rhodan turned around. Yinye was standing in the door. She was wearing a kind of bath towel or short toga; her legs were uncovered from just below her lap, and her arms were bare too.

"What..." she began.

"It's nothing," Rhodan said, sitting on the bed and reaching for the bottle Tschubai had left behind. He took a sip. "I'm tired."

The young Ferron looked at him for a moment, then left the room.

Shortly thereafter, Rhodan was lying down, his hands clasped behind his neck. He couldn't sleep, unable to shake the nagging feeling that he'd overlooked something. He thought about the woman with the monocle. He focused, recalled her face, narrowing down what was giving him such pause.

It was her eyes, he realized at last. One of them was cloudy. The other—suddenly he got it: it was the monocle. What was a monocle? A vision aid, and round. On the blue face. The blue face behind glass. The round vision aid.

He laughed softly as he made the connection. When he'd reached the building at the edge of the death zone, that face—Eneida's face—had appeared in the window. But before she'd stepped closer to the glass, he'd also seen a few things in the room: glowing displays on instruments, technical equipment, a metal dish.

Suddenly, it all came together. The Ferron instruments differed from their Earthly equivalents only in the details: the screen lighting up periodically, the dish, the converters, the energy storage to operate the induction coils. The cottage was home to a radar station, albeit a modest one. A disguised radar station, clearly. The

slightly bulging roof wasn't a true dome, to be sure, but it no doubt served as a protective cover.

That raised some questions. From whom were the residents of Ganashar hiding their radar facilities? Who did they want to observe? And what exactly was a medic doing at this station in the death zone?

6.

Garrean's Audience with the Thort

Ambur was a relatively small planet. Its circumference measured 23,000 kilometers, and its gravity, at 0.89 gravos, was low. The air was thin and only breathable for Ferrons in the lowlands. The habitable zone reached a height of about six hundred meters, and beyond that, breathing without assistance was an ordeal. From nine hundred meters, at the latest, began the death zone where no Ferron could survive without protection.

Compared to the conditions on Ferrol and the other comfortably habitable planets like Rofus, Reyan, Ablon, and Pigell, Ambur was a barren and hard land. Too hard for swarms of settlers to make their way there. The planet didn't spark any dreams of a better life. It promised no great freedom, no colorful adventures. Only respiratory difficulties.

The Ferron military had used Ambur as a training and testing ground. There, they could unleash their weapons' destructive capabilities in all their glory. The bioengineers could experiment on local species or those introduced from other Vega planets, and enrich the natural world with new creatures.

Only around the end of the war had the planet begun to take on refugees: people who chafed at the strict, authoritarian regime the Thort had established; veterans who couldn't settle into a peaceful life; war criminals on the run; convicted criminals who wanted to earn a reprieve from their sentences. That was in addition to the usual mix of fortune seekers, enthusiasts for other worlds, and utopians who believed they had found their paradise in the caldera of Ganashar. But scientists and engineers had come too, lovers of great challenges who were inspired by the magnitude of the task.

The majority of these maybe three hundred thousand Ferrons had taken up residence in Ambur's one and only city: Karbush. There, on the planet's largest plain, on the narrow strip of fertile land at the equator, was also the planet's only spaceport, which the

Pacvass III was now approaching.

The flying wing lay at rest in the direction of flight. Garrean was operating the control stick with his right hand. His left arm, carefully bandaged by Shim, lay inert on the armrest.

"So, the Thort," Garrean said shortly before touchdown.

But since it wasn't a question, Shim didn't give it an answer.

Shim observed the governor. Garrean peeled a Phaun praline out of its cellophane, stuck it in his mouth, and chewed, and at the same time wet a fingertip, which he put into the little spice pot, picking up a few salt crystals. After licking them off, he reached for the next praline.

"Nervous?" Shim asked.

"Hmm," Garrean replied. That was admission enough.

The governor had fought on the Thort's side during the war, but he'd never encountered the Ferron ruler face-to-face. Some Ferrons —at least, those like Garrean, who had sided with him—honored the Thort like a higher being.

"They say nothing that happens in the Vega system escapes the Thort's attention," Shim said. "He's supposedly all-seeing and can appear anywhere in the system at any time."

"That's what they say," Garrean murmured. "But you don't believe it, do you?"

"I don't *believe* anything," Shim replied coldly. "You have to verify."

"And how am I supposed to do that?"

"You could ask the Thort what I ate for lunch the day before yesterday."

For a moment, Garrean stared at his secretary, stunned. "A wonderful idea. Makes me wonder why you're not the governor instead of a waste of space like me."

Shim gave a serious nod. "Presumably because I'll never achieve your affability. And because I wear glasses."

"Indeed?" Garrean asked with boundless astonishment. "That must be it."

Shim steered the six-wheeler out of the city's southern gate and onto open terrain. The Thort's palatial tent was already visible in the distance; the canvasses of scarlet cloth practically glowed in Vega's light.

"Why has the Thort come to Ambur?" Garrean wondered aloud.

“To probably the least important of all the system’s settled worlds?”

“And what does he want with the governor?” Shim added.

Their vehicle was halted by two guards. They got out. One of the two Ferrons frisked Garrean, then Shim in a curt and practiced fashion; the other ran a metal detector over their bodies. They let the procedure wash over them in silence, and the guards stayed silent too.

In front of the tent stood a Ferron in the modest uniform of the space fleet without any rank insignia. He wore a ceremonial short sword by his side and a submachine gun across his chest, within easy reach. At the same time, he gave the impression that if push came to shove, he wouldn’t need any weapons except his own trained body.

They were finally allowed to pass. They stepped into the tent.

An audience with the Thort, Garrean thought.

It was palpably warmer than outside. A pleasant aroma hung in the air, exuded by the cut fruits lying in vinegar bowls.

The Thort was sitting on an aluminum chair with a high, round back. Both his arms were resting on the armrests. The skin on his hands looked like paper. The Thort was ancient. And yet, Garrean saw him practically glowing with vitality.

The Thort motioned for the governor to step closer. Garrean took two or three more steps, then came to a stop again. The Thort really did have a third eye. It was on his forehead. Garrean could have sworn the forehead eye was scrutinizing him, as if a spotlight made of pure mental strength were focused on him.

A Ferron was standing next to the Thort, largely hidden by the throne. Her gaze took in first Garrean, then Shim, then Garrean again. The Thort spoke quietly to her, but Garrean could still hear him.

“Please leave us alone for a moment, Minister Demeris.”

The minister greeted neither the Thort nor the two visitors as she passed. However, she did give Garrean a searching glance, more skeptical than enthusiastic.

Once she’d left the tent, they were alone with the Thort. Garrean forced himself to keep an eye out for the hidden security systems the tent undoubtedly held.

“Thank you for coming so quickly,” the Thort said. “I hope my unannounced arrival isn’t too great a burden to you.”

The words sounded ceremonial, but Garrean was fairly sure he

could hear something like genuine concern in them. He expressed his joy at the visit. The Thort asked if they were hungry or thirsty and gestured to a post with bottles of pure water and pearl water hanging from it, as well as a few Bhisbin vines. Garrean heard the faint crackling of the empty cellophane packets in the governor's pocket.

Both humbly declined the offer.

The Thort offered them a seat, and they sat down. Garrean enjoyed the comfort. The trip into orbit had worn him out more than he wanted to admit to himself; the pain was throbbing in his left elbow. He was annoyed with himself for not taking any painkillers, but the idea of meeting the Thort while under the influence of pharmaceuticals had been too embarrassing.

The Thort asked a few questions concerning the ongoing discovery of dangerous military debris, the building of a new, revolutionarily effective heat pump factory in Karbush, and the propagation of a genetically optimized species of creeping fungus that was suitable as food for Ferrons.

Garrean marveled. The Thort couldn't be all-knowing, no matter how reverentially the popular legends claimed he was. But there was no doubt that he was extraordinarily well-informed.

For a fleeting moment, Garrean considered whether the Thort might have telepathic abilities thanks to his mutation, the third eye, and could be reading the information from his head. He felt ashamed of the Thort. Why would their leader resort to a trick like that? Just to impress the governor of Vega's most backwater planet? Or his secretary?

"I understand you are proud of what you've accomplished here," the Thort said. "Even if I don't entirely grasp why a Ferron who's achieved so much would casually put his life on the line to prevent damage to an orbital mirror," he chided him with a sympathetic smile.

So he even knows about that, Garrean thought. He was thoroughly satisfied because that smile, and the tone with which the Thort had delivered his rebuke, indicated praise for the governor's daring.

Garrean started to talk about the ferrolforming project. He presented the Thort with the vision of a blossoming planet, cherished and cared for by Ferrons. The Thort listened, seemingly less amazed by the vision itself than the enthusiasm with which

Garrean rendered it. And as he painted a picture of the utopia that Planet Ambur would one day be, he realized that the Thort was letting him talk because all this talking was just a prelude to what the Thort himself had to say.

"Hmm," said Garrean, abruptly switching subjects. "I fear I'm boring you."

"You're not," the Thort replied. But he also didn't insist that Garrean continue. He turned his attention to Garrean's secretary instead. "Your name is Shim, yes?"

Shim nodded in confirmation.

"Shim. I ask you to leave Governor Garrean and I alone for a moment."

"No," Garrean heard himself saying to his own astonishment.

The Thort turned back to Garrean. "No?" He looked at the governor, full of curiosity.

Garrean cleared his throat and said, "My secretary is familiar with every aspect of my official duties, down to the last detail." And when he sensed that this wasn't enough, he added, "I'd climb into the bottomless Cisterns of Time with him."

Garrean didn't need to look over at his secretary to know that he was rolling his eyes behind his glasses. Shim had repeatedly professed a technical worldview that ruled out any refuge in the Old Notes. Myths were abhorrent to Shim—the Standing Stones of the Black Beasts, the Hoard of Incidents, and of course, the legends of the bottomless Cisterns of Time.

The Thort hesitated. A wave would have sufficed for the guards to storm into the tent to make his wish a reality. But no one was more surprised by his refusal than Garrean himself.

The Thort, whose face had held a hint of bewilderment, smiled now, and it was a terrifyingly tired smile. Giving his decision, he said, "Before we lose you to the Cisterns over this, he can stay."

Garrean briefly licked his dry lips. He was conscious that the real conversation was just about to begin.

The Thort said, "We're going to vacate Ambur."

Garrean laughed softly.

"Do you understand what I said?"

"I hardly understand it. You want to vacate Ambur? What for? For how long?"

"Forever," the Thort said. "The tenth planet is only vaguely suitable for Ferron settlement. Our activities here are tying up a

disproportionate amount of resources that are urgently needed for reconstruction of the main worlds."

"Thort!" Garrean cried.

"It would have been better if we'd never settled Ambur in the first place."

"Better?" Garrean asked, uncomprehending. "Better than what? Better for whom?" He wondered whether the Thort might be planning to bring all those on Ambur who were escaping the justice of Ferrol back into the scope of the law. But that group comprised anything but the majority of Ambur's population. And the Thort could have arranged their prosecution with far less effort.

And above all, without dragging himself here personally.

The Thort said, "Ambur will be evacuated within the next two weeks."

"Evacuated?" Garrean repeated. "Is there some danger? A danger can be fought."

The Thort didn't respond. He appeared to be pondering. Garrean saw that as a chance. Maybe the Thort just wanted to verify the settlers' steadfastness—whether and to what extent they would fight for Karbush, for their existence on the tenth planet. If the Thort wanted that battle, he could have it.

Garrean said, "We Amburans require minimal resources, as good as no imports from the other worlds, and even that little, we can do without—starting right now, if necessary."

The Thort listened.

"Ambur has been our home for a long time," Garrean said. "It's far more than a catchment basin for those who can't integrate on Ferrol or the other worlds anymore. We're taking in more settlers. We're a release valve for Ferron society." He talked and talked. To him, it was like he had to talk the entire planet out of the danger zone the Thort's order had put it into.

At last, he fell silent.

The Thort said, "You've spoken a lot about Ambur, a lot about the Amburans, but not much about yourself, Garrean. When I appointed you governor of Ambur, I was certain I'd chosen the best Ferron for the job. You've fulfilled my expectations and then some, Garrean. I wish I had men of your caliber close to me, on Ferrol. When you've helped shed so much light on this barren world, what could you do on Ferrol? Maybe in the County of Kush, if that's what you want?"

“No,” Garrean said softly. He would never go back to the land of his childhood, never again look upon the white mirror of Byton Lake. Not only because he’d landed on Byton as a young spacefarer and knew that the true Byton had nothing to do with the auspicious mirror image appearing in the lake’s water every night.

Garrean opened his mouth to present more good reasons for Ambur, for its continuance and the continuance of Ferron civilization on the tenth planet. But the Thort cut him off at the pass with a tired hand gesture. “It’s decided,” he said quietly.

Why doesn’t he at least say “I’ve decided”? Garrean wondered. Was he ashamed of his decision? What sort of conduct was this, hiding behind an ominous “it”?

“You’ve heard my decree, governor,” the Thort said, his voice firmer again. “Will you implement it?”

For one moment, it grew silent in the tent. The aroma of fruit mixed with the smell of varnish. The Thort’s third eye observed Garrean; it seemed to penetrate deeper and deeper into the governor, illuminating every last corner of his soul. But what dwelled in this last, most secluded corner was fear. The untamable fear that war might break on the Vega system again and the worlds would flow with Ferron blood.

In the end, there was only one who stood in the way of that, one figure who brought unity to the diverse and often contradictory Ferron cultures, thus maintaining peace: the Thort.

“Yes,” Garrean said at last, breaking the silence. “But there’ll be a rebellion! I can’t guarantee anything.” *Absurd,* he thought even as he said it. *What am I saying? He’s the Thort.*

“You don’t have to guarantee anything,” the Thort replied. “*I’ll* guarantee it. I’ll stay on Ambur until the last settler has left this planet!”

7.

Rhodan's Farming Deployment

"Get up! Get up!" Someone was shaking him by the shoulder; their breath smelled sweet and fresh. "Or are you dead?"

"I'm dead," he replied, turning in the direction of the slope as he grumbled, unwilling.

When nothing answered him but silence, he turned around and looked at Yinye. "Good morning," he said.

"We're going to eat," she said. "Then we're going out onto the Mouy fields."

"Sounds awesome," he said. He was hoping to get from the Mouy fields to other destinations too: to a Ganashar media center, to a station, airport, or spaceport. They couldn't stay in this place, in this time. They'd set out to find Thora's foster father, Crest da Zoltral, who was being eaten from the inside by an incurable cancer. Crest had left with the telepath Tatiana Michalovna and the Topsidan Wise One Trker-Hon on a search for the legendary Planet of Eternal Life. They had to find Crest. And they had to do it quickly. But their long-term goal remained bridging the temporal divide and getting back to their time, to Earth. In the worst case, they'd steal a Ferron ship and pass the years in a time dilation flight that stretched decades into millennia.

How fast would they need to fly? For how long? And what if they arrived in the Vega system a little too early—a few weeks before he himself had appeared there, brought by the Ferron distress call? Would there be two of him...or more? Would the universe explode, implode, in a googol of possibilities?

For a moment, Rhodan felt like he'd been dropped into an old screen adaptation of Iain Banks's novels: anything was possible. Maybe he'd even meet the being that had spoken into his thoughts on Gol. *Come, Perry Rhodan!* it had whispered. *I need you!* He was surprised by how much this insight put him in high spirits. He felt enterprising. But at the same time, a worry caught up with him.

“Will I meet my travel companions on the fields?”

“Possibly,” said Yinye.

He couldn’t exactly ask directly about Sue and Reg; the young Ferron didn’t know about his nighttime excursion. “Can I speak to Eneida?”

“Do you feel unwell?”

He made an indeterminate gesture.

“I’ll see what I can do,” Yinye said formally.

He nodded. If he could gain Yinye’s goodwill on this matter, he’d follow her onto the fields.

They had breakfast and left the house. Yinye brought him to a bus stop, where an electric bus briefly pulled over, and they joined the ten or twelve other passengers.

Rhodan looked out at Ganashar. The vehicle traveled smoothly and silently along an avenue bordered by thirty-meter-tall plants, half cypress, half giant fern. Most of the buildings were in the same intricate style, made of stone and no higher than three or four stories at most.

Their way led them past the crater lake. There, he saw a few boats and a net being cast from one of them. Soon, the buildings thinned out, replaced by a strip of forest. Then they journeyed along a street leading through fields and pastures. On the pastures grazed black, bristled, barrel-shaped creatures with thick, low-hanging necks. They were feeding, quiet and patient.

In the distance all around them, the caldera’s steep walls rose up. Rhodan saw no path leading into the rock, no tunnel. He wondered how Eneida had brought him and the others to Ganashar. “Is there a road leading out?” he asked Yinye.

“Sure,” she said, turning her face to the window and staring intently outward.

“The Promised Land,” he said. “Who promised it to whom?”

“If you don’t know that, then why are you here?”

“Is it a secret?”

“No.” She still didn’t look at him. “Those who come to Ambur are the ones who have no place on the old worlds. No one covering their back, no anything else, no nothing.” She chortled with a mischievous undertone. “This world is no playground for the golden child. They could break a nail or mess up their hair.”

“Or suffocate in the death zone.”

She made a dismissive hand gesture.

“And Ganashar?” he asked.

“Those who come to Ganashar are the ones who don’t find a place in Karbush. The only oasis in the death zone. The Promised Land, in fact.”

“Karbush?”

She rolled her eyes. “The city. Is there anything you *do* know?”

“Nothing that’ll be much use to me here.”

This admission appeased her. “In Ganashar, everyone pulls their weight,” she explained to him. “No one shirks their duties. The Omenfather helps everything find a balance.”

The bus stopped. They got out. In front of them extended several square kilometers of fields. More buses came to a halt in the parking lot too. Quite a few Ferrons stepped out; some clapped their hands when they saw Yinye, and the young Ferron clapped back. Rhodan received the odd glance brimming with naked curiosity, but no one actually approached him.

Between the buses and the green fields were some hulking vehicles. Some reminded Rhodan of tractors with trailers attached, others of combine harvesters pressed flat. Farming equipment, at any rate.

An unbelievably short Ferron getting on in years came over to them. His hip protruded on one side. His face was covered in furrows and wrinkles that almost divided it into tiny parcels. “Yinye?” he asked. “Who is this?”

“He’s called Rhodan,” she said. “A stray. He’s here to pull his weight.”

“And pull his weight he shall,” said the older man. “To Bukk with you.” It sounded good-natured. He pointed to one of the vehicles. Yinye walked toward it and waved for Rhodan to follow.

Two pieces of equipment were connected together. In front was a visibly aged tractor, its rust-covered state the very essence of the term “material fatigue.” From a drawbar hung a planting machine. From the tractor’s open cabin, a spindly young Ferron man with a bare chest keenly clapped to Yinye.

She waved back indifferently. “Oh-ho, Bukk!” she called anyway. “Slowly, slowly!”

“I’ll take good care of you,” Bukk called back. “You and your little prince.”

She chortled, flattered.

At the front of the machine, Rhodan saw eight plowshares

mounted side by side, and close behind them, the same number of planting discs with snap-and-grab mechanisms. They went around the machine and rose up in the back above the pinch rollers, which would close the furrows again once the work was done.

A not insubstantial portion of this work would have to be done by them—Rhodan and Yinye. Yinye reached into sacks that were waiting between two buckets of water in the loading bay and filled a well in the bay with seedlings. Rhodan followed her example. Then they both lay down on the leather pallets so they could on the one hand access the supply of seedlings, and on the other hand convey the seedlings halfway comfortably into the planting disc's insertion device.

Bukk bellowed, "Finished, princely pair?"

"Oh-ho!" Yinye called back.

The equipment jerked into motion; the tractor drove silently, evidently using an electric motor. They moved at a crawl, though still too quickly for Rhodan. He could hardly keep up with the pace of inserting the seedlings. Bukk had begun to sing, and in terms of the effect on Rhodan's mood, his singing wasn't far behind an outbreak of plague or a mild apocalypse.

He briefly raised his head as if an escape route might appear before his eyes in the caldera's rock walls, ideally one leading directly to Karbush. But the universe was being stingy with miracles right now.

"All good, princely pair?" Bukk yelled.

"It's going great!" Yinye looked over at Rhodan. "Right?"

"At least," he said, making an effort to keep to the tight rhythm of the snapping and grabbing.

In less than two hours, Rhodan's drooping arms started to hurt. "I need a break," he said.

The tractor stopped and they sat up. Bukk stayed in the cabin but let his bare legs dangle out, whooping and yodeling, seemingly to himself. Yinye scooped water out of the vat and handed it to Rhodan in an earthenware bowl. Then she lay down on her stomach, pulled her legs in, and bobbed her feet up and down.

Rhodan sat on the edge of the loading bay and looked at his fingers. He'd caught them on the rotating planting discs numerous times, and the skin was scraped in places.

He turned his attention to the field, where two figures were approaching, straw hats pulled deep over their foreheads, their

arms under their ponchos. Rhodan recognized them from their gait: Thora and Tschubai. Eneida had declared Thora fit for work after all. Or her advice to the contrary had been disregarded.

Soon, they had joined him. He greeted them in the Ferron language. Thora's face was covered by a thick layer of gel that exuded palpable coolness.

"Bull and Sue are still not conscious," Tschubai said. "Eneida saw them this morning."

"Chaktor is working in one of the fields too," Thora added.

Yinye sat up and looked at Thora, confrontational. Rhodan introduced them to each other. "And sitting in the tractor is Bukk," he said. "Our entertainment program."

"I can see you're enjoying the pastoral joys," Thora answered with a sneer and a glance at Yinye.

"Your vocabulary keeps getting more and more frightening," Rhodan marveled.

"We'd very much like to go to Karbush," Thora said, turning to Yinye. "Is there any possibility of that?"

"I bet Bukk would love to drive you there," Yinye replied. "As soon as he's dead." Which sent her and Bukk into peals of laughter.

The next break came hours later. The unfamiliar work drained Rhodan to an almost terrifying degree; Yinye watched this with concern, he thought. The comparatively low oxygen supply was no doubt contributing to his condition as well.

However, Rhodan and the others could at least meet unimpeded. This time, Chaktor joined them as well. The Ferron was practically burning to report everything he had learned.

Yinye drew back. She evidently had a sense of tact. Bukk got out of the tractor and joined the young woman, who almost made a point of finding enjoyment in his company, if her loud laughter was to be believed.

They sat on the ground in the tractor's shadow, drank cool water from the vat, and ate fruits that Bukk had thrown to them.

"I understand the system," Chaktor told them. "Ganashar is an isolated place but sees itself as autonomous, as a self-contained universe."

Rhodan nodded. "Why not? The crater lake provides water; the low altitude lets the settlers breathe. They grow all their own food." He kept silent about the radar station at the edge of the death zone.

They were still in the two young Ferrons' hearing range, and this topic could arouse suspicion.

"This miniature state is led or ruled by someone they call the Omenfather," Chaktor continued. "As the legend goes, he discovered this caldera and readied it for settlement, built the first buildings himself, supplied the machinery, and so on."

"What role does he play for us?" Rhodan asked.

"A slightly awkward one," Chaktor replied. "Ganashar's community lives for and of itself. There's no real provision for guests and tourists. Only people who plan to stay."

"We're doing our duty, at least," said Tschubai, gesturing across the fields. "We're working our asses off and planting...what, exactly? Vega cucumbers?"

"No, Mouy," Chaktor replied. "This community saved your lives. In repayment, they're expecting something other than planting..."

"Vega cucumbers," Thora finished. "Namely?"

"Life," Chaktor said.

"Are they going to sacrifice us to some kind of Ferron Moloch?" Tschubai asked, aghast.

Chaktor burst out laughing. "Quite the opposite. They want you to live and pull your weight for the life of the community."

"How?" Rhodan asked.

"Isn't it obvious?" Thora asked. "Ganashar is isolated. In a genetic sense as well. They want us to enrich the local gene pool."

"Oh," Tschubai said. "I'm a suddenly speechless farmer."

Chaktor asked him, "Or are you not being hosted by a young woman?"

"I am."

Chaktor looked at Rhodan, who nodded. Then Chaktor asked Thora, "And you have a male host?"

"Yes," Thora said. "And you a female one, of course?"

"Yes," Chaktor replied.

"When were we chosen by our partners?" Rhodan wondered.

"The lady of my house told me that we weren't so much chosen by them as assigned to them," Chaktor said.

"By the Omenfather," Rhodan guessed.

Chaktor confirmed. "I think that's the price we're supposed to pay for residing here." He cast a glance first at Rhodan, then Tschubai, then finally Thora. "Or am I wrong?"

“We should stall, put it off as long as we can,” Thora said. “We might lose value to the community as soon as we make that contribution.”

“At the very least, we should get better acquainted with this community,” Rhodan said. “We were saved by the people of Ganashar, after all. We might need their help again—to get to Karbush, for example, or for Sue and Reg’s treatment. We won’t leave without those two.”

Thora looked at Rhodan for a while. Then she said, “We should meet this Omenfather. Anyone who can intervene so deeply in the elementary aspects of life must have quite some authority.”

Suddenly, Tschubai craned his neck, raised a protective hand over his eyes, and looked out into the distance. Rhodan followed his gaze. A vehicle was approaching them, moving quickly, flying close to the ground, bobbing and weaving strangely. “A hovercraft,” he said.

“No, a ground-effect vehicle,” Thora corrected him. “It uses uplift near the ground and moves using the air vortex under the wing profile.”

“Yes, now that you mention it,” Tschubai said in a lightly mocking tone.

The silvery vehicle glided toward them. It looked like a boat made of aluminum with a not-very-wide delta wing stuck onto it. A propeller whirled on the rear wing.

The ground-effect vehicle braked and landed less than twenty meters away. The propeller spun slower but didn’t stop completely. Two Ferrons were on board. The glazed cockpit swung open backward, and one of the two Ferrons stood up.

It was Eneida. She waved Rhodan over. “Rhodan, you have to come with me,” she called to him. “Right now.”

Rhodan jumped up and cast a glance at Tschubai. “Let’s jump,” he said.

“No,” Thora insisted. “You’re not a doctor. Anything medical, Eneida can provide better than you can. She needs your help for another reason. Nothing life-threatening.”

“She’s probably right,” Tschubai said.

Rhodan nodded. He ran over to the vehicle and heard Yinye cry out sharply. But he was already climbing up the delta wing and clambering into the cockpit. It closed over him as the propeller increased its speed.

The vehicle flew off.

They were standing by Bull's bed. Rhodan looked at the deep indentations on his wrists; Bull must have struggled against the bonds with all his might. There was a tube in his mouth.

"He's neither calmed down nor regained consciousness," Eneida explained. "We've sedated him. We needed more than muscle relaxants, however."

Rhodan pointed to the sensors attached to Bull's chest and the tube in his mouth.

"Oh, that," Eneida said, waving a dismissive hand. "Incidental details. We're working with steroids. That increases the breath rate, which has to be kept under observation. For safety's sake, we're assisting his breathing mechanically."

"And those are *incidental details* to you?"

A wan smile. "Comparatively," she said quietly. "What I find far more alarming is that none of our antibiotics work, and none of our antiviral medicine has any effect. His condition just isn't getting any better."

"What explanation do you have for that?"

"None," said the doctor. "Except that we're dealing with neither a bacteria nor a virus—even if that's somewhat groundless speculation given the unimaginable number of possible viruses."

"Speculation you wouldn't engage in if you didn't have a firm suspicion."

"Yes," she said. "We examined his blood, lymphs, saliva, eye fluid, also his spinal fluid, of course. No trace of bacteria. No trace of viruses. Only..."

"Yes?"

"Where do you come from, Rhodan?" She looked him in the eye for a long moment.

"Do you need this answer for a diagnosis?" he asked.

She pointed at Bull. "He's not a Ferron. His eyes aren't used to the light of Vega. He doesn't even come from this solar system. And you're like him."

"I'm like him," Rhodan confirmed.

"So?"

"What did you find?"

She sighed. "I can't force you. The Omenfather—he doesn't know yet, by the way."

Rhodan slowly nodded. “Thank you.”

“What we actually found there, I’m not sure. If it weren’t too crazy, I’d have said...rubble. Unimaginably tiny fragments of unimaginably tiny machines.”

“I understand.”

She laughed. “I’ll readily believe that. Our scientists have claimed for years that such machines could be possible. But it’s a long way from a claim to something operational. Can you develop machines like this, that infiltrate the brain and control the consciousness?”

“No,” Rhodan said. “We can’t.” *But we’re right on track to be able to. And Reg and Sue had contact with technology that might have been advanced enough. With the Fantan.*

“Do you see more clearly now?” Eneida asked.

“Yes.”

“But you don’t want to share your assumption with me.”

He breathed in deeply. “Eneida, you saved me and my friends. I feel endlessly indebted to you. Grateful. Can you imagine that I’m not just being arrogant when I don’t give you a clear answer, but that I’m protecting you?” He thought for a moment. “You. Your children. Your grandchildren. And your great-grandchildren’s great-grandchildren... Because just a few words, a few implications could cause more danger than I could keep under control. Because I might have said too much already.”

She gulped. Then she looked at Bull for a while. “If I had a slightly more vivid imagination, I’d have come to the completely ridiculous idea that you might be a time traveler who has to operate as delicately in the past as a brain surgeon.” She stared at him searchingly. “But the power of imagination has never been one of my strengths. So I’m assuming that you’re a blinkered, self-satisfied secret-monger who loves making a big fuss over nothing. But who—this would be interesting to know—isn’t on a mission to Ganashar?”

“I am on no such mission,” Rhodan said quietly and emphatically. “And I won’t endanger either you or Ganashar.”

“Good,” she said. “Then let’s go to the girl.”

Sue Mirafiore wasn’t responsive either. One cannula led into her arm, another out of her lap.

Eneida stepped over to her bed and ran a hand over her brow. “Her forehead’s wet,” she said. “She transfers heat in this way. But

we already established that we're dealing with visitors from very far away." She gave Rhodan a brief smile. "She's working hard. I have no idea how she does it. But she's fighting, maybe even against the unfathomable machines she's carrying inside herself. We're giving her nutrients, water, restoratives. That's all. Beyond that, we can't help her."

"It's fine," Rhodan said.

"Come on. The air swimmer is waiting for you."

On their way out, the woman with the monocle came toward them. She appeared not to notice Rhodan.

Eneida said, "Firzay is something like the kind soul of the healing house. She doesn't see very well anymore. Not at all at night. And she talks very, very little."

Rhodan laughed gently. Very little? Eneida seemed not to know the old woman very well.

The pilot of the ground-effect vehicle—the "air swimmer," presumably—was leaning against the wing and smoking an unbelievably long, white pipe with a narrow head. The smoke smelled faintly like pepper and chocolate.

"I'll take you back to the fields," said the pilot. "I'm sure you want to pull your weight."

"I know my obligations," Rhodan said, getting in.

As the air swimmer sped over the ground, Rhodan thought things over. In Eneida, he had an ally, even if he couldn't figure out why exactly. But this ally had made it clear enough to him that she couldn't effectively help Sue and Reg. Were there better clinics in Ganashar? Would it make sense to turn to the Omenfather about this matter? Would they find help on Ferrol? But then they would have to go via Karbush. How? Back into the transmitter mountain? Rhodan had his doubts.

When they reached the field, Vega was slowly sinking behind the caldera's rock walls. Thora, Tschubai, and Chaktor were nowhere to be seen. Yinye, on the other hand, had already spotted him. She jumped from the planting machine, ran to him, and clapped to him in greeting. Her face was glowing. "Ready?"

"But of course," he said.

"He's ready!" she called to the tractor. And Bukk started singing.

The deployment ended less than two hours later. Rhodan asked

to be able to speak to Tschubai, Chaktor, and Thora again.

"What for?" Yinye asked.

"Because I want to," Rhodan said sourly.

"Then you can find your own way home," Yinye said, and set out with Bukk in the direction of the bus stop.

But after a few steps, she turned back around. Bukk followed reluctantly, then stopped, and the two argued. Yinye went to the tractor and got up into the cabin. Bukk shouted something that Rhodan didn't understand. Yinye jumped out, a stick or staff in her hand that resembled her own walking stick, and ran toward Rhodan with it. She stopped in front of him, extended her arm, and knocked against his shoulder with the stick, still angry. One end of the wood was blunt, the other forked.

"This is Bukk's Sharctash," she said. She drew in breath through her nose. "You probably won't need it. In case you do: with the fork, you can pin down the Sharsharym. That's the honorable way. For you, it's better"—she indicated the blunt end—"to stomp them."

He looked at her, at her eyes sparking with anger. "I appreciate it," he said, taking the stick. "I'm sure the Sharsharym are dangerous creatures."

"They're the price to pay for living in Ganashar."

"And you can smell them," Rhodan noted.

In answer, she inhaled again, then smiled. "Don't come home too late."

She ran back to Bukk, who was waiting for her.

It took a while for Rhodan to find the other three. Their supervisors were also not thrilled with the group's wish, but they ultimately accepted it.

"A heavy degree of social control," Tschubai observed.

Rhodan told them about the situation in the healing house and his theory.

Tschubai nodded. "The Fantan. They put a security system into their Besun. Like clipping their wings."

"What can we do?" Chaktor asked.

"We can't exactly operate on them," Thora said. "And if the staff in the clinic can't either, that leaves just two options: we give up or we search for technologically advanced assistance."

"Which we won't find in Ganashar," Tschubai added. "Or anywhere else in this era, possibly."

"There are still transmitters in this era," Rhodan replied.

“Whoever has that technology must also be able to fight nanotechnological manipulation.”

“So all we have to do is contact the scout and get him to use his resources,” Thora said. Rhodan listened to the tone of her voice to detect any sarcasm, but she was being serious.

He said, “We’d also have to contact the scout to find a way back to our own time.”

“Other routes lead to the future too,” she said.

“A dilation flight,” Rhodan replied. “But for that, we’d need a spacecraft. An air swimmer wouldn’t do it.” And when he noticed Tschubai’s questioning gaze: “A ground-effect vehicle.”

“Above all, we have to stay together,” Chaktor said.

Rhodan nodded. “We’ll travel into the settlement. We’ll look at where Ras lives, Chaktor, Thora, and I. Then Ras will know where to find us in an emergency. If we’re not all brought to this field tomorrow, we’ll meet tomorrow evening at the healing house. Unless absolutely necessary, we shouldn’t get on our hosts’ bad sides. We might still need them, or at least help from some of them. Nothing’s pushing us, after all. We can plan carefully and act carefully.”

“Sue and Reginald,” Tschubai reminded him.

“For the time being, they’re in the best hands with Eneida,” Rhodan said.

“It would be better if they didn’t have to be in anyone’s hands,” Thora argued.

8.

Garrean and the Shoumar Crisis

A few days after Garrean announced the Thort's decision via every media outlet, the situation in Karbush escalated.

Since the start of the week, the orbital shuttles had been launching and landing at almost one-hour intervals, all filled with the Ferrons who were willing to emigrate. Or at least those to whom the Thort's every word was law, even holy directive.

Garrean watched the treks to the spaceport with mixed feelings. On the one hand, he noted with approval how smoothly the bureaucracy and its logistics were functioning; on the other, he'd have much rather seen the emigrants from Karbush and Ambur turning their back on their—and his—world with visible sadness.

In the information ministry's jargon, the migrants were being termed "returnees." Ultimately, all Ferron life did indeed come from Ferrol.

Naturally, there were conflicts during the check-ins at the spaceport. The orbital ferries could generally carry a hundred passengers, the biggest among them three hundred. Thus, use of military transports was inevitable if they hoped to evacuate the planet in a few weeks rather than a few years. Ten thousand passengers per day was the maximum, but what about the Amburans' real estate, their movable goods, their pets?

Garrean was called to the spaceport around the evening. The port commander had said, "It would be better if you came yourself." The governor was beloved by the planet's population. The Amburans saw him as one of their own, working tirelessly, familiar with their problems, and approachable at any time.

Ambur had become his adoptive homeland, one might say. His stomping grounds extended far beyond the administrative tracts, although he spent time there too. When necessary, Garrean could transform into a devourer of documents. But his true love was for the city and the world around it: Karbush and the borderless land.

There were no oceans on Ambur. Beyond the city and the caldera of Ganashar, there were believed to be a few hundred wanderers, Amburans who swept across the planet equipped with little technological assistance—indeed, across the whole planet, not only the equator regions. The wanderers climbed to the tops of the mountain ranges, visited the death zones, some even the polar regions. Pilgrims without a goal. Hermits. Treasure hunters...and also ghost watchers.

Garrean let them be. He was even in contact with some of them, for old time's sake. All this was a help to him now as he approached the crowd at the spaceport. He could do without bodyguards.

The irritability was almost palpable, a mix of electricity and saliva-sweat. Heated noise hung over the people like a bell; Garrean couldn't distinguish who was shouting what. Unmistakable, however, was the sheer hatred driving this clamor, with growing force.

Slowly, the crowd parted before the governor. Garrean saw a young Shoumar standing in the middle of all the agitation. Its supportive tail was swiping anxiously across the ground, and it made melancholy flute noises, as if embarrassed to be at the center of this much attention.

Garrean noticed that no poisonous thorns had grown out of the back of the Shoumar's paws. It was evidently tame. Its owners had removed the thorn capsules in good time so that it had neither developed the thorns itself nor, Garrean assumed, taken on the instincts of a fully grown Shoumar.

Behind the arrival hall's panoramic window, an orbital ferry towered over them: the *Taktrol IX*.

Everything grew silent. No one moved anymore. The figures around him stood as still as statues.

Behind the Shoumar, a hand hooked into its fur, stood a young Ferron, maybe twelve or fourteen years old. In her other hand, she held a projectile weapon up to her own temple. Two space soldiers had aimed their weapons at the Shoumar too. Behind one of them stood a civilian who had drawn a curved dagger and placed it against the soldier's throat. A corpulent Ferron with a pale face was holding two children, both no more than five years old, both with strikingly pretty faces, sheltering them against herself and trying to cover their eyes with her hands. Both children were fending her off,

however, and staring at the Shoumar. One of the children was holding a plastic doll in an outstretched arm.

Garrean recognized the doll as Zuya, the Unyielding Sister. *As if Zuya could fix this situation with one of her incantations, like she does every evening in the serialized adventures.*

A few other space soldiers were still in the crowd, pressed in on all sides by the Amburans. For Garrean, the situation appeared as follows: if the two soldiers shot at the Shoumar, the civilian would slit one of their throats and the young woman would kill herself.

"Well?" he asked.

Silence.

"Who's in command here?" he inquired.

"Me," said one of the space soldiers—the one not being threatened by the civilian. This man was not Amburan. He was one of the soldiers the Thort had brought with him. *Dragged with him,* Garrean corrected himself.

"What's your name?"

"Ras-Bachtav."

"A Rasbol," Garrean said. "One from the tribe of heroic song poets, in other words."

One of the people standing nearby laughed derisively.

"What song do you want the world to come to write about you, Ras-Bachtav?" Garrean inquired.

"The Song of Duty," the space soldier croaked. He tried to clear his throat but failed.

"And what does duty demand?"

"That we import no Amburan beasts to Ferrol," Ras-Bachtav replied. "No Shoumars."

"Hmm." Garrean stepped over to the Shoumar. The animal whistled in fear and pressed its head against the girl's shoulder. Its supportive tail knocked against the floor twice, three times. "Naturally, this beast is ringing the chimes of Ferrol's doom."

The surrounding crowd's laughter sounded hostile and sneering, but it was laughter, at least.

"It carries the bestial genome," the soldier said in his own defense.

"While we Ferrons are such peace-loving creatures," Garrean said, tapping cautiously against the tip of the weapon the Rasbol still had pointed at the Shoumar.

The soldier lowered first his weapon, then his head. "I have my

orders," he said.

"Oh, of course," Garrean said. "Who doesn't? And your orders demand that you cause a bloodbath just because a few kids don't want to leave their pet behind?"

"It would die here!" the girl cried. "It can't defend itself. It won't find anything to eat. It doesn't have the thorns."

"Then why did you mutilate the animal?!" Ras-Bachtav asked.

"Why are you now mutilating the planet?" called someone out of the crowd. "It's being mutilated by you deporting us."

"Is Karbush going to be a testing ground for the military again?"

"Will our houses..."

"Our houses!" cried other voices. "Our gardens!"

"And so you promised them *what?*" Shim asked the governor in his office a few hours later, pushing his glasses back up.

Garrean ran a hand through his bristly, copper hair. "That their gardens, their houses, their city, that all of Karbush will be rebuilt on one of the other planets. And they can take whatever they want with them. Even the Shoumar, if it indeed belongs to the family. What else was I supposed to do? Wait for the Shoumar business to lead to blood being spilled? For deaths? A revolt?"

"And you asserted that the Thort would guarantee it?"

"Hmm." Garrean smirked. "I seem to recall him mentioning something about a guarantee."

Shim looked at him in disbelief. "You can't be serious. Why did you do that? To save a Shoumar?"

"A Shoumar and its family."

"The Thort will deny having even *hinted* at such a guarantee. You've given him leverage to remove you from office. He'll have free rein to appoint a more compliant governor."

"With no backing from the populace. He'll unleash chaos, maybe armed resistance. A mass exodus from Karbush to more inaccessible areas. A sustained boycott of the evacuation." He waved a dismissive hand. "What's done is done. I promised it. He'll stick to it. He'll have to."

"Guall will have to," Shim echoed.

Guall. It was odd hearing the Thort's given name. The name recalled the person into memory. Garrean saw the haggard, scarred war veteran in his mind's eye, the warrior who lay trapped in an

old man's body like a tomb.

But the way Shim spoke the name, it was not a reverent reminder of the person, but rather an unmasking.

"Yes. He'll have to. Denying a guarantee like that wouldn't be a wise move," Garrean said, summing up his hopes.

Shim took his glasses off and cleaned them, although there wasn't a speck of dust on them. "You mean to force him, Governor?"

Garrean thought for a while, then said, "Yes. If I have to." The moment he'd seen the Amburans and space soldiers facing off, weapons drawn, ready to kill and—worse still—ready to die, he'd already seen the seed of a new war. Right there in the departure hall, he'd seen a war more devastating and final than the first. He didn't want a war, and despite all his doubts about the Thort's decree, he couldn't imagine the man and his government wanted it either.

Shim replaced his glasses and looked at Garrean. "And if someone had gotten there first?"

"What do you mean?"

"If they'd forced the Thort to do something first."

Garrean stood up and went over to the window. He looked out onto the streets of Karbush. He saw the big and small furniture trucks, the buses full of passengers, the military patrols.

"You mean someone is forcing the Thort to evacuate Ambur?" he asked. "Who could do such a thing?"

Shim had turned his back to Garrean and gone silent. The young Ferron was thin, downright scrawny in build, but he towered over Garrean by more than a head.

A thread... Garrean's statement that he'd climb into the bottomless Cisterns with Shim hadn't been mere empty words. The governor had always cherished Shim's cleverness, and even more so his reticence. He'd always taken it as a sign of loyalty. Maybe, he considered now, that had been rash. Maybe Shim was keeping something quite different locked away inside him. Hidden even from Garrean.

But the time for secrets had passed.

"Then it would be time to talk," he said quietly.

Shim slowly turned to face him.

9.

Rhodan's Contribution

Rhodan and Tschubai were still standing together in the light of the gas lamps. "Can you do it?" Rhodan asked.

"There, for sure. And I can bring you back too. I'll get to my house on foot."

"Where someone will be waiting for you?"

"Yeah. A young Ferron. She's nice. Striking."

"So's Yinye," Rhodan said. "They all are. And it disgusts me how they're controlled and used. Because that's what it boils down to. Someone is able to interfere with the most intimate aspect of their lives and exert power through it."

"In the name of genetic optimization."

"In the name of whatever. We need to see this Omenfather for ourselves."

Tschubai nodded.

"But not tonight," Rhodan said, holding out his hand. Tschubai grasped it and jumped with him into Sue Mirafiore's room.

As if they'd planned to meet, Eneida entered the room shortly after their arrival. The situation with Sue and Bull hadn't changed over the last few hours. Rhodan's helplessness tormented him, though in a confusing way it also came as a relief that even Eneida, the medic, had little more idea than he did.

"The situation's stable, then," he reassured himself.

"Stable at the same level as before," Eneida replied. "You can't do anything here. Go. Sleep." She pointedly switched off the light. At the same instant, the star-studded night sky became visible in the window.

It was night, and he was tired. But Rhodan couldn't help laughing when he thought of his bedroom. And of the room opposite his.

"Is it because of Yinye?" Eneida asked.

"Yes."

"You should consider whether you really need to be so dismissive toward her."

"Dismissive? I don't know what she wants. Maybe she's into me, but she's really young—I'm sure it's just a whim!"

"*Into you?*" Eneida sounded amused. "I don't think it's anything so deeply emotional."

"Then what is it?"

"Yinye has always lived with an open back," she said. "And now you're releasing her from that."

Rhodan understood the individual words, but didn't grasp what the Ferron was getting at. "What do you mean?"

She spread her fingers apart, full of astonishment. "Is there anything you *do* understand?"

"Explain it to me. Please."

"As a rule, Ferrons have a mother, a father, grandparents, often great-grandparents, and last but not least their tribe, covering their back," she said. "As time goes by, they draw away. The great-grandparents die, the grandparents, the parents. Then your own back is uncovered, true, but you have someone else's back. Yinye doesn't have any of that. She's an orphan. And now..."

Rhodan shook his head angrily. "But she doesn't need me for that!" he said. "She's a clever, pretty young woman. She shouldn't have any difficulty finding a boyfriend..."

"No such difficulties plague her," Eneida interrupted. "But the Omenfather has decreed that Yinye is the one to whom you make your contribution. And now you're...what? Too particular for her?"

"Don't be silly," he managed to say.

He could literally see the distrust in her eyes. He sighed and looked out of the window at the night sky over Ganashar. A sea of stars. One of them was his home sun. It was light years away, and not just that. He was far in the past, millennia before his birth. What was he expecting? That here and now, the very same rules applied to customs and romance as in small-town North America in the early twenty-first century? Who did he think he was? The morality police on parade?

"It's your decision," said Eneida. She abruptly turned and left the room.

"These women!" said Tschubai, who had observed the conversation in silence. He put a hand on Rhodan's shoulder and

took him home.

Shortly afterward, Rhodan was lying in bed, thinking. Something scratched against his door, and he stood up, reached for Bukk's Sharctash, which was leaning against the wall, and opened the door. It was Yinye. She was sitting barefoot on a stool, and had apparently been scraping the door with her toes.

"I didn't hear you come back," she said.

"I like sneaking around."

She stood up. "Did you need the Sharctash?" she asked, pointing to the stick.

"No."

"Do you need it now?"

"Now you're there to smell the danger, Yinye."

"Exactly," she said. "Do you know what my name means?"

"No."

"Then you have to let me in now."

Defenseless against this unassailable logic, he stepped aside. She walked into the middle of the room and paused, then looked around as if she'd never been inside it before. There wasn't much to see, so she sat down on his bed.

"Yinye is Pajonferron and means 'the one born in a holy place.'"

"Interesting," he said.

"Yes, very. Especially if you're interested in Pajonferron culture. But that's hardly your main area of research."

"Not so far," he admitted.

She sighed. "You make it difficult."

"Not on purpose."

"Where do you come from? Where did you grow up? What's your profession?"

"I'm a pilot."

"Okay, a pilot. For planes? Air swimmers? Spacecraft?"

"A little of everything," he said.

She seemed satisfied. He was still standing, the Sharctash in hand. She chuckled softly.

"Oh! Do you mean to use this opportunity to beat me to death?"

He rested the Sharctash against the wall.

"So, now you're unarmed," she asserted. She narrowed her eyes. "Aren't you afraid?"

"I don't do much out of fear," he said.

"You're not afraid of women, then?"

He laughed. “I never said that.”

She looked at her bare feet, spread her toes, bent them. Everything was clearly functioning to her satisfaction. “Why don’t you want to make your contribution?” she asked.

He crouched down in front of her and began, “You know, where I come from…”

“It may be completely different compared to here,” she interrupted. “But you’re not where you come from. You’re here, where you’ve arrived. Do you understand the difference?”

“I understand,” he said.

“Good.” She rolled onto her back and slipped off her pants in the same motion. Then she sat again and pulled her shirt over her head. She was sitting in front of him now, clothed only in a pale blue slip. “Do you see anything left that stands in the way of making your contribution?”

“Very little,” he conceded.

Then she discarded even that small amount.

“You look a little used,” Thora jibed during the short mealtime they took together two hours before their work deployment. Thora was using a kind of thermos flask, pouring a steaming drink into a cup that also served as the flask’s lid.

“Thanks for your concern.” Rhodan bit into the fruit Yinye had gifted him. With a subdued voice, he said, “No significant change with Sue and Bull. No improvement. No crisis.” He took another bite. The fruit’s flesh was deep violet and exuded a grapefruit-like aroma. The juice was viscous and dripped into his beard.

“Storing some for later?” she asked, suspiciously good-humored.

“I’m still working on getting a decent razor,” Rhodan said. He ran his fingernails over his chin, making it crackle.

Thora looked at him. “So, you ‘made your contribution’?”

Rhodan took the cup Thora held out to him and drank a few gulps. Then he nodded. “And you?”

“Not yet,” Thora said. “I explained to my aspiring partner that I haven’t decided if I’ll stay in Ganashar yet. In my case, a genetic refreshment of the colony isn’t necessarily in the cards.”

“Indeed?” Rhodan asked, forcing an acerbic smile.

“Indeed,” Thora confirmed. “You were reckless, by the way. Needless to say, it was—if I may be so curious…” With a jerk of the chin, she indicated Yinye, who was standing next to Bukk and

carefully yet playfully pushing him around with the Sharctash. "What's she called again, the one who currently holds the office of village beauty for you?"

"Yinye. Apparently, it means 'the one born in a holy place.'"

"Sounds life-threateningly romantic."

"I'd call it more of a matter-of-fact romance," he explained.

Thora sipped from her drink. "I fear the one born in a holy place will want to verify that she's really reaped the reward she was promised by your contribution: an insemination."

"Yes," Rhodan said.

"There's every reason to believe she'll be disappointed. She probably won't become pregnant, after all. And the subsequent medical examination of the genetic material you provide will also point to certain unexplainable discrepancies with the Ferron genome."

"Probably," Rhodan said. He considered whether to inform Thora that Eneida, at least, was already aware thanks to her own analyses.

"Well?" Thora asked.

"Well, we should leave Ganashar and the Promised Land as quickly as possible," he said.

"For Karbush," she said.

"We don't have much other choice. Karbush is the only place with a spaceport."

"Are we going to acquire a means of passage in some aboveboard way or hijack a vehicle?"

"Hijack?" He laughed softly. "I should be seriously worried about your moral maturity when it comes to property."

She took another sip of her hot drink. "I suggest keeping your expectations in check. After all, I won't be born for another few thousand years. There's a lot of time left for me to mature." She put the cup down, yawned, and stretched with abandon. "Incidentally, with my birth at the very latest, all crimes so far will be absolved, including the wanton acts I intend to commit in the near future."

"When you look at it that way, all sins are forgivable."

She showed an unbelievably bewitching smile for the time that day. "You're telling me!" Suddenly, she grew serious. "You probably haven't had the chance, but I've listened around a bit, asked around. There's a certain unrest in the settlement. There are rumors. Fears. Nothing specific, nothing anyone wanted to talk to

me about specifically."

"And what do the rumors say?"

"The end of the world, of course."

Bukk strolled over, pointedly uninterested, his Sharctash—which Yinye had given him back that morning—laid casually across the back of his neck. They stood up. Yinye waved to him from the planting machine's platform. Chaktor and Tschubai, who had sat a little farther along, got up too and went back to work. The teleporter would have informed Chaktor about the condition of the other two.

Vega was already touching the horizon when Rhodan sensed Yinye tensing up. She drew breath in through her nose, then sharply cried out. A moment later, she was standing up on the platform with the Sharctash in her hand. Rhodan positioned himself beside her. Left and right, about fifty meters away on each side, two other tractors stopped crawling along. Two or three Ferrons standing on each loading bay were staring over at them.

Bukk, who had stopped their tractor, jumped over the drawbar and down to them. In his hand, he held a kind of revolver with twelve or more projectiles in its barrel.

"Sharsharym," Yinye whispered. "And they're hungry."

A wind had arisen and was whirling dark blue dust toward them from the field's distant edges. Something in the dust vortex moved, rolling and hopping and skipping.

Yinye shifted closer to Rhodan. Then the dust cloud rolled over them as well.

Rhodan squinted. The whirling dust hailed against his skin. Bright, pale shapes that resembled a claw or fist made of pure bone peeled out of the dust. They rolled over the platform and were carried away by the wind again.

One got ensnared on a corner of the platform and dug in there. Bukk fired at the bone claw without hesitating. When the bullets struck the skeleton, two snakelike forms came out of it. They were emerald green and glided across the ground like beings made of quicksilver. Bukk shot at the creatures, which evaded him almost playfully. Yinye stood completely still. A faint scent like peppermint wafted through the air.

The barrel of Bukk's revolver was empty. He turned around and looked at Yinye, his face rigid with horror. Yinye took two, three

elegant, almost dance-like steps forward and spun the Sharctash over her head. Meanwhile, the snakelike things rushed at a frenzied pace, completely unpredictable in their movements. The dull strikes shook the vehicle. The Sharsharym evaded so swiftly that Rhodan could hardly follow them with his eyes.

Yinye hit one of them in the middle. Dark red blood sprayed out. The animal made a terrible clanging sound. Yinye turned the Sharctash, caught the head with the fork, and swept the badly injured animal from the platform.

Rhodan saw the second Sharsharym darting toward them. He fled, but he knew immediately that he had no chance. Then the Sharctash crashed onto the ground where the animal had just been.

Not a moment later, Bukk screamed. The Sharsharym had gotten purchase on his left and bitten him in the groin. Yinye was already there with the Sharctash; she grabbed the animal's head with the fork and tore it away from Bukk. The beast squirmed, but Yinye pressed its head against the ground and stomped it over and over with her shoe. The Sharsharym's movement grew slower and finally stopped.

Rhodan watched as the animal literally died out. The emerald green faded to a purulent grayish white.

Yinye slid the corpse off the vehicle, and Bukk stood up, his hand pressed to his waist, flashing Yinye a twisted smile. Then he collapsed onto his knee on his injured side.

"Help me," Yinye said quietly to Rhodan. She stepped over to Bukk, grabbed him by the shoulder, and rested him on his back.

Bukk's eyes rolled until Rhodan could only see the white of his eyeballs.

Yinye said, "Take his hand away."

Where did she get that knife? Rhodan wondered, reaching for Bukk's wrist. It was cold. He removed Bukk's hand from his body.

With three or four quick cuts, Yinye exposed the wound. Rhodan saw that the flesh had gone black and glistened like crystal. *Coal and coal dust,* he thought.

With a furious cry, Yinye stabbed into the wound. "Blood!" she exclaimed. "You have to bleed!"

But where the knife struck, the black substance shattered and dissolved into glistening black dust.

Bukk's head tipped to the side.

One of the other two planting machines had lost two Ferrons; the other hadn't been attacked by the Sharsharym.

Rhodan sat next to Yinye in the tractor, steering the vehicle. Yinye had thrown her jacket over Bukk's corpse, which was lying on the platform.

"Does that happen a lot?" he asked eventually to break the silence.

"It happens," she said. She tapped lightly against her nose. "People like me are supposed to prevent it."

"You did," Rhodan said. "For me."

"Too little," she said.

He went silent.

They reached the bus stop, and Yinye reported to an older Ferron, who made a few notes. Someone came and took the body away. Yinye and Rhodan got on the bus, then waited a while as the cabin filled up. Thora and Tschubai came, then finally Chaktor, and the bus set out.

Rhodan pondered it all. What did it mean that they'd been deployed to the fields? That Yinye was assigned to him? Did it mean anything at all? Their plunge into the past. Their arrival on the lost planet. Sue and Reginald's condition. His whole reality was turning into something that resembled Bukk's gruesome wound: a black, amorphous mass that dissolved into dust when you touched it.

At that moment, he felt Yinye's head on his shoulder. He felt the trembling of the muscles in her upper arm. Cautiously, he put his arm around her shoulder and his hand in the soft copper of her hair.

10.

Guall's Night Flight

When he woke up, night had fallen heavily over his tent and the plain of Karbush, but he'd had enough of sleep. Originally, he'd planned to set out just before sunrise. He'd have to wait another three hours for that. But what would be the point?

He struggled out of bed. It was that and nothing else: a struggle beyond compare, a torturous pulling and straightening of his ramshackle body. Like a stubborn beast of burden that bodily fought against his will. Eventually, Guall forced his decrepit body into the yoke of his mind and stood up straight next to the bed.

He hadn't woken up Vocotósh, but he suddenly felt his chamberlain next to him. "It's early," the man said softly.

"It's late," the Thort murmured, raising his arms and stretching as far as he could to each side. Vocotósh slid the crutches under his elbows, then bent down, took off the old diaper, and put the new one on in a fluid motion. The steward washed Guall's upper body with a heated Huzca mushroom, said to have a light disinfecting effect. After that, he put the remaining items of clothing on the Thort, one after the other, like a doll. Finally, he pulled the thermoponcho over the Thort and activated it.

"Well, you want to go into the night," said Vocotósh.

Guall reached for the poncho's hood and pulled it over his head. The heat was invigorating and did his limbs good. It was like he'd come down with a sudden case of adventurous spirit and wanderlust. The breathing mask sat on the hood like a bizarre jewel.

"I need a polycopter," he demanded.

Vocotósh asked, "Should I arrange a pilot team and security forces?"

"No. I'm not going to war," Guall said. "I want a semiautomatic copter for my sole use. No other crew."

Vocotósh took note of the instruction with his unusual serenity.

He activated his communicator and spoke discreetly, as if the matter concerned intimate personal details.

"It's a Tekpach model," Vocotósh informed him. "It'll be deployed from the *Caresc Cao* and flies autonomously. It should be here in half an hour."

Guall used the time to have something to eat and drink.

Soon, he heard the sound of a motor, and shortly afterward, headlights came on. The Tekpach's autopilot didn't need the light; its highly advanced navigation computer was specialized in night flights even over the most difficult terrain. Vocotósh was the one who needed the light. He'd insisted on keeping the polycopter in view.

The Tekpach landed less than twenty meters away from the tent. Vocotósh accompanied the Thort as far as the vehicle and checked it. The two contrarotating coaxial rotors slowly came to a stop; the two blades, positioned one on top of the other, each had three additional blades. The cabin could be sealed airtight; the Tekpach had enough oxygen reserves on board to comfortably supply a single passenger for ten days.

The compressor worked faultlessly; at least two thirds of the helium was stored in a bottle made of a light metal. The elongated helium bubbles on the long side of the oval-shaped craft were flapping a bit in the cool night breeze.

Vocotósh waved the Thort into the cabin, and Guall sat down.

"When will you be back?" asked Vocotósh, again as quietly as if a single word could wake the sleeping world.

"We'll stay in com contact," the Thort said in place of an answer.

"You expressly wish for no military escort?"

Wish, thought the Thort. That was an art he'd long forgotten, assuming he'd ever mastered it.

"Don't worry. I told you, I'm not going to war."

"You did say that," Vocotósh confirmed.

The Thort pressed a button and the transparent cockpit canopy closed. With a light hiss, oxygen-rich air streamed in. Then Guall flooded the flight balloons with helium and started the rotors.

"Enter destination," the autopilot demanded.

The Thort gave coordinates that would take the polycopter south. That wasn't the final objective. He'd only find out the real destination—the meeting place—while in transit. Or maybe he

wouldn't find out at all. It was possible the polycopter would be remotely taken over and set on a course that way. The benefactors could do a lot of things.

"Sit back and enjoy your flight," said the autopilot.

Guall smiled and closed his eyes.

They were in the air. *I'm hanging from the beam again,* he thought. And he didn't want to think about what lay below him this time.

The route led the Thort over the city of Karbush. The Tekpach was not the only vehicle in the air by any stretch of the imagination. The radar screen showed Guall countless small cargo helicopters, and some heavy ones, on the way to the spaceport. From the spaceport, which he passed at some distance, the next flights were just launching.

Guall looked out of his polycopter at the scene of evacuation in the brightly lit city streets. Swathes of settlers were moving toward the spaceport from all directions, in buses, trucks, and small automobiles, even on animals or in carriages pulled by plump, dark creatures. Some were on foot.

Many of Ambur's inhabitants were blindly devoted to him and following his instruction. Many others would only leave if forced, would even take up arms to resist the evacuation. The Thort wasn't thrilled about that, but he had no choice.

Guall briefly shut his two ordinary eyes and concentrated on the third. He became aware of the clamor of emotions in the city: the desperation and the pain of leaving, mixed and blended with euphoria, an optimistic spirit of departure, a kindled wanderlust, and among it all, always the fanatical eagerness to subordinate one's will to that of the Thort.

As packed as the streets were, most Amburans were sleeping now. Maybe they had rested their heads in the hope of waking up the next day to a brighter world, where Guall's evacuation order turned out to be nothing but a nighttime horror.

The Thort turned his attention away from the Amburans and opened his other eyes again. *Is it worth it?* he considered. Without the benefactors, things would look very different in the Vega system, no doubt about that. The transmitter network wouldn't exist, and as a consequence, the Thort couldn't boast of his omnipresence, which contributed so much to his mystique.

Odd, incidentally, that even such a technologically advanced civilization didn't come to the conclusion that Guall's seemingly simultaneous presence in one place and another could be down to a technical trick. A machine that was far from unthinkable, even if Ferrons were far from being able to build and master it.

And from this thought of a different, more universe-scale technology, it was only a small, logical step to the producers of such technology. To the thought of another people who existed outside the Vega system.

But such ideas were foreign to most Ferrons, as if their mental picture of the galaxy was still trapped within the boundaries of old myths, in writings like the *Idols' Unity*, where the world of stars beyond Vega was sung about as an endless desert.

Fanciful, in fact—because who would have the power to devastate entire star clusters and turn them into a dead wasteland?

Guall had always been sure that life among the other stars was possible, even probable. He had known it before the benefactors had proven it to him.

"Do you authorize the new course?" the autopilot asked at that moment.

"Yes," said Guall. He considered whether to ask the autopilot who had transmitted the new coordinates and where this course would leave him. But what for? He would see for himself soon enough.

The polycopter had left the great plain behind hours ago now. Now and again, Guall had checked on the radar that no one was following the Tekpach. The atmosphere was already thin at low altitude. The autopilot helped find the lowest possible passes; when necessary, it took detours.

Of course, it would have been unheard of to disobey the Thort's express instructions and put him under guard, even if it was for his own good. Still, he was sure that such attempts occurred, even in the military. And it wasn't a growing paranoia that had convinced Guall of this so firmly.

Not *just* that, at least.

Guall switched on the polycopter's headlights. The stark light picked details out of the darkness. The land below him had grown rockier, more rugged. For a while, he watched the beam of light. There were no streets to see, no settlements.

He heard more helium being pumped into the flight balloons on the polycopter's long side and aimed the headlights in the direction he was flying. The flank of a mountain range towered steeply in front of him. Bone-pale rock. No light there. In the mountains, too, no sign of Ferron life.

Ambur, thought Guall. *Ambur. Ambur.* If you said a word often enough, it lost all meaning. It turned into an enigmatic cipher or dissolved into sheer insignificance. What a peculiar world the tenth planet was. A barren place with no appeal to most Ferrons. Worthless, at least at first and even second glance. There were natural resources, of course, but not nearly as many as on the more abundant heavenly bodies. Little water, no seas. Life was only possible in the lowlands, in the deepest mountain canyons, or at the level of Karbush, the only region that was situated deep enough, and was flat and large enough, for a well-populated city.

Almost as if a helpful spirit and master builder had laid this plain there so a city could be founded, Guall thought.

The polycopter ascended higher and higher. As the massif blended in with the night, Guall left himself in the hands of the Tekpach's automatic navigation.

At last, the vehicle made it over the crest. Below them, a high mountain valley opened up. He didn't know if any Ferrons had ever been to this place before. He noticed the polycopter going lower and assumed they were close to their destination.

A few minutes later, the Tekpach touched down. The rotors slowed and stopped. The suction tubes emptied the helium balloons, but the compressors kept working a while longer.

Then silence came over the Thort. He was exhausted, but he didn't want to sleep. He didn't think about anything in particular, and unimpeded by considerations of the present situation, memories came into his mind: images of his earliest years, his life as a freak of nature, images of Shenidin, then others who had given his life a new direction or a key impulse. He saw the time travelers in front of him, Rhodan and his young companion, who had opened his third eye. He heard Lossoshér saying that he, Guall, would bring the Vega system unity and peace, would be its first Thort.

As Lossoshér had foreseen, he'd become Thort. He thought of all the early battles that had only birthed new battles, as if there would never be an end, as if a destructive frenzy and an intoxicating desire for destruction had eaten its way into the minds

of all Ferrons. He thought of his encounter with Ke-Lon and the ancient Crest, who had been kept alive only by an iron will, a flame of spirit burning bright in a burned-out body.

Guall had become just like Crest, hadn't he? What was keeping him alive? The all-seeing Thort had ended the Dark Age; he had brought unity and peace. Or the appearance of unity and peace, since the Ferrons' unity was bound to the Thort, and no one but him ensured peace. Without him, all the old wounds threatened to reopen.

Maybe one day the Vega system would be able to do without Guall. But not without the Thort. He had no heir, however. Naturally, there were some among his colleagues he considered highly talented—reliable administrators, even charismatic leader figures. But no one except him had the third eye. No one would be undisputed.

Guall had to live on, one way or another.

He was mercilessly left waiting, nodding off a few times and each time waking up more tired than he'd fallen asleep. Shortly before sunrise, he finally sensed that something had changed.

He yawned, stretched his creaking bones, and looked up at Ambur's sky. It was a pale blue, drab and sallow, much less intense than over Ferrol. To Guall, it seemed as though the demiurges the *Idols' Unity* spoke of had only sketched this sky so far and were far from done.

"Why Ambur?" he asked himself in an undertone.

Without him taking any action, the cockpit canopy's seals released. In an almost instinctive motion, Guall pulled the hood's breathing mask over his face. The roof swung open, and he got out. He felt the cold of the Amburian morning on his exposed hands, but the thermoponcho kept his body warm.

"You gave the instruction?" a voice asked.

Guall took in the melodic sound for a moment. Strange. All sense of hurry, all pressure of time was removed from him like leaden armor. The voice did not urge him.

Slowly, with almost dance-like movement, he turned around. The scout was markedly taller than Guall. His build looked thoroughly Ferron, but his face exuded alienness. It was dominated by two eyes that resembled deep blue glass bubbles, seeming no more structured than that. Guall couldn't fix his gaze on them. The mouth was lipless; instead of a nose, the scout had a breathing hole

covered by a thin, almost see-through membrane, presumably an organic filter. When he breathed, it sounded like someone was gently shredding withered leaves. His skin was visibly scaled and bright like sand. Carfesch wasn't wearing any protective suit. Even his hands, with their seven fingers, were uncovered.

"I gave the instruction," Guall said, and smiled. "As instructed."

"Thanks!" said Carfesch.

"But it'll take some time before we've fully evacuated Ambur. There will be resistance. And my governor, who's supposed to counter this resistance, provides a form of resistance himself."

Carfesch didn't look in any way perturbed. "Time is of secondary importance," he said. "What matters is that this world is cleansed of inhabitants."

Cleaned? The word echoed in Guall's consciousness. Did the Ferrons *dirty* this planet with their sheer presence, then? He asked, "What's this actually for?"

Carfesch looked at him with those glass bubbles. "Ambur is the price for the transmitters. The transmitters have enabled you to be the Thort, who has brought peace to his people."

"Of course," Guall said. "I know that. And I'm still ready to pay that price. You can inform the benefactors of that anytime."

"Thanks!" said Carfesch.

"The peace is fragile, however," said Guall. "It relies too much on me, the Thort. The Thort can't die."

For a moment, Guall felt as though the gaze of those glass bubbles had turned away from him to look into the scout himself. Then Carfesch said, "The Thort will live. You have my word."

Guall sighed and closed his eyes. When he opened them again, the scout had disappeared. Guall watched Vega rising. A great deal of light spread across the sky. The Thort had often wondered where the scout might have come from and on whose behalf he made his inquiries. Was he even working on someone else's behalf? Perhaps he worked for himself, a scout of his own accord, and the benefactors he'd occasionally made insinuations about were mere facade, nothing but smoke and mirrors.

Why was Carfesch dealing with someone like him at all? Anyone capable of building devices like the transmitters could simply take what they wanted. Or was Guall thinking in overly warmongering terms? Did Carfesch come from a culture where violence belonged to antiquity along with the belief in demons or

the demiurges from the *Idols' Unity*? Had the scout simply lost his belief in violence at some point?

Guall sat down in the polycopter again and closed the cockpit canopy. "We're flying back to Karbush," he told the autopilot. Shortly thereafter came the hissing of helium flowing into the balloons; the rotors flapped; the Tekpach rose into the thin air, swung around, and set out for the great equatorial plain.

Not long after that, he received a com transmission. It was Demeris, his first minister.

"Have you been thinking about our meeting, Thort?" she asked him. Her voice was accompanied by a light crackling.

"I've thought about nothing else," he said cheerfully.

11.

Rhodan and the Omenfather

The next day proceeded largely without incident. They were driven by bus to the fields, but no one was assigned any work. Only Yinye had anything to do. She moved this way and that across the empty fields, apparently with no firm destination. She paused, got her bearings, and walked onward, the Sharctash always in her hand, sometimes over her shoulder.

Rhodan's offer of accompanying her had been met with sheer incomprehension.

Tschubai took the opportunity to check on the two patients. He found them unchanged. Rhodan thought a lot about the nanomachines in their bodies—in their minds. However the security system worked, it had to have some kind of knowledge of the outside world to be able to confirm if their victims—their Besun—were still in Fantan territory. How did they determine that? Were there specific transmitters in the Fantan realm, on their ships and space stations, that continuously broadcast identifying impulses to which the security system reacted? That seemed more plausible than the assumption that the system could measure space and time and independently determine if action was required.

Now, these impulses weren't there to be received anymore. In all likelihood, the relevant Fantan technology didn't even exist yet in this past era.

Why, then, had the system reacted so late? And did they have any possibility of recognizing the impulses' patterns and imitating them to disable the security?

Vega already passed its zenith when Yinye joined them.

An older Ferron came and asked for her conclusion. Yinye explained, "Hazy. The Sharsharym's scent marks are fading. But there's a strange aroma mixed in with them. It's as if the fading away has been forged."

The Ferron sighed. "You're ascribing too much intelligence and

strategy to them, citizen," he said. "That's just sniffers' superstition."

"They're clever," said Yinye. "More than we'd like to think. And they're always growing even more so. They learn."

"Maybe you want to dress up your shame over yesterday's failure in gushing praise for the creatures," the man said stiltedly.

"She saved my life," Rhodan said, pointedly standing next to her.

"Yes," the old man said at a slow pace. "Yours."

"Is there something wrong with that?" Rhodan asked with a cold smile.

The man turned to the group and cried, "At the sniffer's behest, the field is off-limits today. We'll have to double our work in the coming days."

They waited in silence until the man had left.

"A day off." Tschubai stretched. "Shall we go swimming in the lake?"

"I'd like to talk to the Omenfather," Rhodan suggested. He looked at Yinye. "Is that possible? Does he give audiences or anything like that?"

She looked at him, not surprised in the least. "How did you know?"

"Know what?"

"That the Omenfather plans to talk tonight in Ganarzynes Square?"

Rhodan put his mouth to her ear. "Some people talk in their sleep."

Ganarzynes Square wasn't located in the city center, but in largely undeveloped outskirts. There were no residential buildings to be seen; the surrounding buildings had to be warehouses or barns. With their corrugated metal walls and flat roofs, they looked like oversized shipping containers.

Rhodan and the others tried not to arrive as a group. Rhodan stood with Yinye, Tschubai a little apart with Chaktor, and Thora on her own. Rhodan made a rough estimate of the number of attendees, who were standing around in small or large groups or sitting on sheets spread across the ground, with food and drink like a picnic. There had to be several hundred, maybe even over a thousand.

They waited. After an hour or so, the crowd, which had grown quite a bit larger by then, slowly split in two. An electric truck rolled into the square and stopped in the middle. The vehicle's eight wheels were almost head-high and looked far too weighty for the load they bore: a pile of aluminum poles that now clanged onto the ground, thrown by many hands.

A team of Ferrons assembled the poles. The workers were clearly well coordinated with one another. After a few minutes, all the poles had been built into a construction that was now carefully erected, lifted and pulled up on ropes. It was a high seat similar to the one an umpire would sit on at a tennis match, or a lifeguard at the beach.

One of the seat's two armrests could swivel and was wider than the other. Rhodan could see a microphone attached there. Left and right on the backrest were palm-sized speakers.

The electric truck left the square again.

The crowd looked excited, eager. They touched and shook each other on the upper arms, stood shoulder to shoulder and slowly swayed—or rocked—back and forth.

A wave of silence spread over them. Everyone was looking at that chair. Then, a man swiftly climbed the ladder onto it and stood upright for a moment, displaying himself to the crowd from above, five or six meters over the people's heads. He sat down.

The term "Omenfather" had made Rhodan imagine an older man. Someone with long, loose hair, a beard, a toga, a walking stick, maybe barefoot, spokesperson of an agricultural and political utopia, a blend of Indian guru and Old Testament prophet.

The man on the structure was wearing something that would have been called a Mao suit on Earth. Black pants, a black jacket with sewn-on breast pockets, and a thin, round wreath as a collar. The buttons shimmered a faint red, as if lit from the inside. They were closed up to the collar. His boots gleamed black, the shafts reaching to just below his knees.

Rhodan couldn't help narrowing his eyes. Weren't those boots' heels unnaturally tall? And the figure wearing them, in contrast, uncommonly short, even for a Ferron? His skull, however, looked oversized, if well proportioned with his face, which was long rather than wide, his angular chin, his thin eyes with the wide copper arches of his eyebrows above them. The man's head was bald, but it was a head that wore baldness well.

The Omenfather—for who else could this be?—swiveled the moving armrest over to him and adjusted the microphone with a practiced grip. Without clearing his throat or making any other preparations, his said in a not particularly deep, not particularly sonorous, somewhat rough, yet thoroughly pleasant voice:

"The day we've all feared has come."

During the Omenfather's speech, Rhodan tried to keep the others in view. Thora was listening with great concentration. Tschubai, a few meters to the right, had pulled in his shoulders and drawn the sombrero deep over his face. Chaktor, beside him, was craning his neck.

Although he kept looking left and right, Rhodan had no difficulty following the Omenfather. The Ferron spoke clearly, almost penetratingly. Rhodan couldn't quite tell where this effect that the Omenfather exerted on his listeners came from. Nevertheless, he couldn't quite escape the speaker's charisma.

"The Thort himself has ordered all of Ambur's inhabitants to leave the planet. Not within a year, not after measured discussion, but immediately, without delay, right now. The Thort himself decrees it. For who, if not the Thort, that seal of freedom who has saved so many lives, would have the right to shape so many lives?"

The way he said them, the words "freedom," "saved," and "lives" sounded corrupt and suspicious.

A soft murmuring ran through the crowd. It didn't sound friendly.

"Ganashar," the Omenfather said, letting the word hang in the air like a shining promise. "Humiliated and raped by the military, Ambur has been the world that no one wanted, the midden heap for biological and mechanical excrement, the cloaca of Ferron culture. Ambur—the graveyard of broken things. Thus it became so that those who could find no home in the Thort's perfect world could come to Ambur. Anyone who could not find their way out of the dark epoch into the light of the new era at least had Karbush. And if they couldn't feel settled in Karbush, they still had Ganashar available to them."

Murmurs of agreement.

"It's true, Ganashar is freely available to everyone. Why? Because Ganashar is free. However, it seems the peace that the Thort guarantees can no longer tolerate so much freedom. The Thort whom none of us chose to be the one who chooses for us. The

Thort"—the Omenfather took his right hand, formed it into a claw, and reached up to his forehead as if to tear something out of it—"in his all-seeing majesty with that unspeakable third eye, who came upon our system, unsummoned and unalterably like a solar eclipse."

Laughter. A few derisive remarks.

The Omenfather continued, "That we never sought help from Ferrol doesn't matter in the Thort's reckoning. That we don't live on credit, but make our contribution to each other and to the whole, doesn't matter. That we're no burden on Ferrol's magnificent banks or the agencies and government institutions proliferating in Thorta, that we deafen our ears to the scandalmongering that blares out of the Red Palace doesn't matter. Or am I wrong? Does it count after all? Does it count a lot, in fact? Has our freedom become too much, too intolerable for the Red Palace? Because Ganashar is proof to the sycophants and braggarts: life is possible without you! It's possible without any of the bureaus and offices, palace guards and palace whores, command headquarters and banks. Doesn't Ganashar say, to the horror of every commander, banker, and minister, quietly yet unmistakably: we don't need any of you?"

"We don't need any of you!" the square echoed back. "We don't need any of you!"

"Let them hear it. Let every functionary, war profiteer, and bloodsucker hear it. Let their governors and representatives hear it. Shout it across the chasms between the worlds, let it reach to Rofus, Reyan, and Ferrol!"

"We don't need any of you!" the crowd cried. "We don't need any of you!"

The atmosphere hadn't been cleared by the listeners' anger, only put under pressure, tense to the breaking point.

Rhodan didn't doubt that the Omenfather was right when it came to many of the details. There was no need to romanticize the Thort as someone who'd been chosen for his post democratically. But then what of the Omenfather? Rhodan strongly doubted that the charismatic man on the speaking chair governed the community as a democratically elected mayor.

Someone touched his shoulder. Thora had stepped over to him, unnoticed.

"An interesting mood, don't you agree?"

He nodded deliberately. "An interesting man."

"Have you grasped the purpose of this exercise?"

“That much is obvious,” Rhodan said. “He’s calling for war against the Thort.”

12.

Garrean, Fresh Vegetables, and Dietary Fiber

They took Shim's car and drove to his house. Garrean had left a message with his deputy that was as short as it was vague. It stated that his presence was required in some districts of Karbush or other, particularly Partupan and Diphilettu.

If Vela Waygen took an interest in verifying that, she would learn that he really had set out in the direction of Diphilettu. As soon as she'd confirmed that much, her interest would be satisfied. In contrast to most residents of Karbush, she saw Garrean as anything but suited to the role of governor. She used every opportunity Garrean gave her to push herself into the spotlight.

Shim lived in the Black Cube, a high-rise at the edge of the Diphilettu district. Not the best and brightest quarter of Karbush, but also hardly deprived. The furnishings in his apartment were modest: a long wooden table with a few chairs around it that he evidently also used as a wardrobe for his underwear and other clothes; a glass jug in which he was storing his data crystals; a plastic chest plastered with images of brave Täc of Ghaspas, the Eyeless Seer of Zuya, the Unyielding Sister, and of a few other popular heroes from the entertainment industry; and finally, a refrigerator, which reported shortly after their arrival, "You should acquire some fresh vegetables and dietary fiber."

"Yeah, yeah," Shim murmured.

They sat down. The table's surface felt smooth, as if polished by countless sleeves over generations.

"I can't imagine my office is bugged," Garrean said. "Absurd. It's not as if we're at war."

"Who knows?" Shim said ominously. "Anyway, we're here now. We can speak freely."

"Assuming the nefarious foe hasn't also mined your home for intelligence."

"Low risk of that," Shim said.

Garrean breathed out deeply. “So, you believe the Thort is acting under duress. Who could be forcing him? Who’d be powerful enough? Leaving the military aside for now.”

“Why should we leave the military aside?” Shim responded.

Garrean shook both hands in a dismissive gesture. “Why go to the effort? To make Ambur into a training ground again? They can have that anywhere in the death zone without any of this.” He could see in Shim’s face that he wasn’t thinking of the military either. “If not the military, then who?”

Shim stood and went over to his hero chest. For a moment, a grotesque image came to Garrean’s mind of Shim taking an action figure out of the chest and playing with it. But Shim took out not a figure, but a tablet. On the way back to the table, he activated the device, clicked open a few files, and held the screen out to Garrean.

Garrean took the tablet out of his hand and studied what he saw. “At the bottom of the Cistern,” he said quietly. “What is this?”

“If you don’t know...”

“I don’t. Where did you get this image?”

“One of our satellites captured it. One of the old, unprogrammed military satellites that’s currently searching the surface for depressions, for natural resources, and for lowlands with air dense enough to breathe. The satellite transmitted the image a few days ago. Yesterday, I instructed it to send me the image again. The satellite disputed ever having recorded or sent such an image: there was no record of it. No log.”

“Hmm,” said Garrean.

It depicted a rocky, rugged landscape. The vegetation was sparse: a few purple lichen fields, a forest of Stouc mushrooms. Otherwise, just naked rock. A cobalt-blue cylinder hung above the landscape. Although the shape was fuzzy, as if someone had wiped across a freshly painted watercolor, Garrean had no doubt that this cylinder was of artificial origin, a technological creation.

He could see nothing that resembled a propulsion unit. What was holding this object in the air? What unimaginable power? If he trusted the data superimposed on the image, this cylinder was enormous. A secret project of the Ferron military? Garrean had been part of the military himself for long enough to be certain that producing an aircraft like this was far outside the capabilities of Ferron science and technology.

This led to a conclusion as obvious as it was horrifying. What

was hanging there above the death zone on Ambur came from outside the Vega system. And if Shim was right, the Thort—even if against his will—was working with those who had come up with this cylinder, built it, and flown it to Vega.

"What are we supposed to do?" Garrean pondered out loud.

"You should acquire some fresh vegetables and dietary fiber," the refrigerator reminded them.

"I'll speak to the Thort," Garrean said.

"The Thort," Shim echoed. He took off his glasses, rubbed the bridge of his nose, and put his head back for a moment. Then he put his glasses back on. "Let's walk through it. You're Garrean, I'm the Thort."

Garrean laughed out loud for a moment, then straightened up in his chair. "Thort," he said. "Thort Guall. What is that cobalt-blue cylinder hanging above the ground on Ambur?"

"I don't know of any cobalt-blue cylinder."

"I have a picture."

"Show me the picture. Hmm. A forgery, and a badly made one at that. Look at the blurry contours all over the place. Amateur hour!"

"I'll set every satellite, every recon aircraft I have searching for __"

"All right, you caught me. Yes, the cylinder exists. It's a weather balloon."

"Quite big for a weather balloon."

"A new kind of weather balloon. For new kinds of scientific experiments."

"Okay, then. I'll fly out and see this weather balloon for myself."

"All right, you caught me. It's not a weather balloon at all. It's a secret military project."

"Serving what purpose?"

"A secret one."

"It's not Ferron technology!" Garrean cried. "What is this here in our system?"

Shim leaned far forward and smiled. "Garrean, my good man. You seem a little overworked. I can understand that. The stress of the evacuation. The pending disappearance of your role. The stress and excitement of your return to Ferrol. It's all become a little too much. I'll put you in the care of my best medical staff. For your own

good, you see. You'll rest and recover, and soon enough, I promise you, you won't see any more cobalt-blue cylinders."

"Hmm," Garrean said. "Maybe. Or maybe he'll be entirely open. I'll speak to the Thort regardless."

"The Thort will lie to you," Shim said coldly.

"Why should the Thort lie to me?"

"Because that lie is what his entire rulership is built on."

Garrean stared at him in disbelief. "Shim," he said, "are you exposing yourself as a revolutionary?"

Shim shook his hands dismissively. "There's nothing revolutionary about me."

"Then what *is* going on with you?"

Shim hesitated. "You never asked me why I came to Ambur."

"I never ask anyone why they come to Ambur. Nor have I ever asked anyone why they were born."

Shim smiled. "Have you ever asked yourself how the Thort can immediately appear in the most distant places? Why he's so omnipresent?"

"Of course."

"And how did you answer?"

Garrean laughed. "Oh, Shim. Omnipresence is a little extravagant but technically not too difficult to carry out: a look-alike or two here, a slightly delayed 'live' broadcast there, a Ferron winking at the crowd from a distance, made up to look old and put in the right uniform—and there you have it: omnipresence. The rest can be left to the rumor mill."

"No," Shim said. And then he told the governor about the transmitter network that linked the planets surrounding Vega with one another, which the public had no knowledge of.

Garrean didn't say a word.

Shim stood up. He put a ready meal in the microwave, slid a tube of wine into the pouring mount, bit off the sealing cap, and placed some for him and Garrean into the hemispherical wine glasses.

They drank, then ate in silence.

"And you?" Garrean asked later. "How do you know about it?"

Shim explained that too. A young Ferron woman played a role in this story, and a young man who had fallen in love with her, just as Shim had. The other man fought with all the means at his disposal. She left one day, and when she came back, she explained

that Shim's rival had taken her to another planet using a machine—just like that, with no spaceflight, no time loss, as if by magic. She was in doubt, and she stayed the night with him. He did a lot of good and beautiful things, but in the morning, her doubts awakened again. A worry was gnawing at her. From Shim's apartment on the grounds of Bodunach University, she tried to call the other man. He didn't reply, even after an hour. Then she ran off.

Shim never saw her again. On a hunch, he'd left his apartment. On the way, he'd called his parents. His mother's voice had sounded strange. "Smichec, when are you coming home?" From her tone, he grasped that someone was waiting for him in his parents' house.

"Smichec?" Garrean asked.

"The name Shim is one that I...*acquired* shortly before booking passage to Ambur." He took off his glasses, held them out in front of his eyes, and stared through them into the middle distance. "I can't ever go back to Ferrol, you understand."

Oddly enough, Garrean didn't have the slightest doubt, either about Shim's (or Smichec's) story or the existence of the transmitter network.

The entire Vega system is a sham, Garrean thought. *A mechanical work of theater. In reality, everything is completely different. Lurking below the surface of the government, maybe all of Ferron history, runs a completely unknown, alien engine.*

Garrean thought for quite a while. He stroked his chin, ran a hand through his hair with a crackle. He drank Shim's wine and occasionally heard the refrigerator raise its admonishing voice to demand fresh vegetables and dietary fiber.

Eventually, they agreed to set out right away, straight from Shim's apartment.

A decisive idea had come to Garrean. "If you're right and this thing is capable of manipulating satellites and data banks, there's no point in wasting time evaluating photos. But there might be a chance of discovering something via a private source. A source who recently wrote something to me about a ghost. Which I didn't believe, of course."

Garrean's private source was called Okpata. The Ferron lived in Meyktalar Baylor, a high valley on the edge of the equator zone. The land there was somewhat higher and the air thinner, but it was still breathable without assistance for those who were accustomed to it.

At Garrean's request, Shim ordered an autonomous all-terrain taxi. While they waited for the vehicle, Garrean asked Shim if he had a toolbox at home.

"Yes," Shim said. "Just in case."

Garrean opened the box. So far, that "just in case" scenario had clearly never arrived; most of the tools lay untouched and were even in their original packaging. Garrean picked out a small assortment, then left the apartment.

A short while later, the taxi rolled up. It was an older model but a solid one; the tires indicated city volumes; the voice modulator had developed its own unique tone but remained comprehensible.

Garrean ordered the autopilot to steer the car to the southern edge of Karbush. After passing the last city buildings, it rolled to a stop. "Travel beyond this point is only permitted with a permission seal from the governor," the autopilot informed them. The simple machine wasn't capable of identifying Garrean as the governor. Nor was Garrean considering contacting his office and ordering the necessary seal transmitted over com. Too many of the Thort's people were romping around the palace these days.

Instead, he used Shim's tools to get to work on the autopilot's access cover, assiduously ignoring the vehicle's protests. Less than two minutes later, he had control over the car.

"The battery's almost full," he informed Shim. "That'll suffice for the journey to the farm."

With the press of a button, he sent compressed air into the four tires. Then he switched on the electric motor, unfolded the car's solar sail, left the guidance track that was the road, and drove out onto open land.

On the way, he revealed just a little about Okpata. This included the detail that the Ferron managed the Fanshyc farm largely on his own. Machines kept an eye on his Jinwar herds, milked the Jinwar cows, and transported the fatty milk to the farm, which made very little profit.

If Shim had understood Garrean correctly, this poor economic efficiency didn't bother Okpata the Jinwar farmer. In fact, the farm seemed to be a mere smoke screen. Okpata's passion wasn't for the Jinwar but the palladium that washed up from the river placers of the Meyktalar, the river that meandered through the Baylor.

They had to drive until evening. The journey up to Baylor's first foothills gave the car no real problems. Then followed a steeper,

rockier stretch. Garrean looked around and found a pass. Shim could tell that the governor wasn't traveling this way for the first time, though he couldn't have been here for quite a while.

The descent from the ridge into the Meyktalar valley felt horrifyingly dangerous to him. The mountain range beyond shimmered pale blue in Vega's fading light; a few thin clouds swirled around the peaks. The river ran in loops along the astonishingly wide valley. In the dark green pastures, Shim could see a Jinwar herd. The matriarchs' energetic bellows could be heard even inside their cabin, accompanied by the pitiful trumpeting of the adolescent bulls, who knew that they wouldn't be allowed into the warm circle of bodies tonight either.

Suddenly, they had a firm street under their wheels again. The car moved almost without propulsion. The altitude indicator on the dashboard told Shim they'd descended to 650 meters. The air in the high valley would be breathable to them but only with great difficulty.

The farm's main building came into view. It looked asymmetrical, like a lopsided tower made of dull metal. As the car rolled closer, Shim realized it was the wreckage of an old megadrone. Most likely, the unmanned aircraft had crashed or been shot down during a military exercise, and no one had deemed it necessary to recover it.

A few impact field tents were lined up east of the drone. The domes' matte transparent sheets were stabilized by high pressure from inside. Behind the foil, Shim could see the lumpy contours of Jinwar cows who were, judging from their swaying motions, in blessed circumstances and shortly before calving. If Shim recalled correctly, Jinwar mothers sought out lower lying land before birth, because the more oxygen-rich air gave the calves greater chances of surviving the critical first few days.

The car drove past some pools filled with a colorless liquid that Shim intuitively knew wasn't water. Garrean switched off the motor and the car rolled to a stop.

A Ferron stood in front of the building, legs apart, his arms folded behind his back, as if he'd been waiting for them. The taxi made them aware that it would be advisable at this height to put on breathing apparatuses.

Garrean ignored the advice and opened the door. Shim felt the sharp pull of air escaping from the cabin to the outside. He

breathed in deeply and got out. A putrid smell wafted over from the pools.

Okpata took a few steps toward them. His body looked like it had first been squished together sideways by a press, then compressed from head to toe: a square figure from a Ferron press. His gait was odd, askew, as if he had to fight through the resistance of the air itself like it was syrup. His copper-colored hair stood up in unruly strands.

"Commander," Okpata said, giving a curt bow. Then he cast a questioning glance at Shim before Garrean introduced his secretary. "They get younger and younger," Okpata said, and it sounded like a rebuke.

As he entered, Garrean knocked on the metal of the drone. "Nice piece," he praised him.

Okpata chuckled, flattered. The plainness of the facility could not be overstated. A bed, a vat of water, a table. Okpata appeared to be no great friend of chairs or other seating options.

On the table were numerous small receptacles made of plexiglass. Most of them were filled with silvery white grains, with some nuggets as large as Shim's fingernail. If this was palladium—and Shim had no doubt it was—then he was looking at a fortune.

Shim and Garrean sat on the bed, Okpata on a mat he rolled out on the floor.

"You're not here for a bonanza, commander," Okpata assumed. He smirked. "You won't find much on the bank of the Meyktalar anymore anyway."

"No," Garrean said, looking at the receptacles. "You've been working hard."

"And you?"

"The Thort gave an order to evacuate Ambur," Garrean said.

"Did he now?" Okpata asked, indifferent. Neither the Thort nor his order seemed to affect him. "Did you come to pick me up or do you want to hide away here with me?"

"Neither."

"Then you're here because of the ghostly cylinder," Okpata concluded and grinned openly in Shim's face.

"Yes," Garrean said. "What do you know about it?"

"Nothing." Okpata waved a dismissive hand. "It appears, it disappears, but it's interested in neither palladium nor my noble Jinwar. Nor in the worms."

“Worms?” Shim asked.

“Didn’t you see on your way here?” Okpata asked. “The vermin I’m breeding in the pools? It’s my discovery! A worm that feeds on hydrogen sulfide and carbon monoxide—or rather, it’s nourished by special bacteria that live under its skin. It therefore has no need for its own mouth or digestive tract.”

“Hmm,” Garrean said. “If the cylinder isn’t even interested in your formidable worm breeding, what do you suppose it *is* doing here?”

“I don’t know.”

“Have you had contact with the cylinder?” Shim asked.

“Of course not.”

“Is there only one or are there several?” Shim probed further.

“I don’t know. Now that I think about it, I’d probably say several. I don’t know.”

“How did you become aware of them?” Garrean asked.

“Through my prospectors.”

It turned out that Okpata had a handful of robotic helpers at his disposal. They were plain, spider-legged machines that scouted the land near and far, not just the Baylor, looking for palladium. Every so often, they reported small discoveries to him. On top of that, the Ferron had photos of the terrain sent to him at regular intervals via com. Okpata said he could find sources the machines couldn’t—places their bulky organs overlooked.

In some of the images, the cobalt-blue cylinder had appeared. *Or one of the cylinders.*

Garrean and Shim looked through them, then Shim copied them onto his tablet, supplemented by the coordinates of the sightings.

“There’s a pattern there,” Shim said after a while. “I could try to predict where the next appearance will be.”

“Do it,” Garrean agreed.

The tablet ran its calculations for some time. Finally, three results appeared. Two were in regions beyond the travel range of their vehicle. The third location also couldn’t be reached in their taxi. It lay high above the Baylor. But the cylinder would appear there in fifteen hours, if the tablet was not mistaken—shortly before noon the next day. “We could climb,” Garrean said, casting a questioning glance at Okpata.

“I still have my mountaineering equipment. Is that what you mean?”

That was exactly what Garrean had meant.

"Waygen will have you reported missing," Shim said.

"Hmm. I don't think so. She'll use this chance to show the Thort what a supernaturally glorious organizer she is. She couldn't wish for a better chance to recommend herself for greater things on Ferrol."

Shim looked at him. "Are you angry with her?"

"No," he said. "I've always felt sorry for her."

13.

Rhodan's Argument with Eneida

They were sitting in Thora's room. It was large and airy, with finely meshed latticework covering the windows instead of glass panes. In the room's center, an electrically powered indoor fountain splashed and bubbled.

Rae-Edzo, the host—a lean, bony man of indeterminate age with a small, timid face—had offered them a late meal, which Thora had politely refused on everyone's behalf. Rae-Edzo had said goodbye for the night with a desperately servile bow.

"I don't understand what keeps these Ferrons here in Ganashar," Chaktor said. "They live in fear of vermin and are patronized by this rabble-rouser. It's all so unclear."

"Serfdom can have something magnetic about it," Tschubai said.

"Chaktor's right," Rhodan replied. "We need clarity, and fast." He rubbed the bridge of his nose. Then he told them about his observation on the day they were rescued, and about his assumption that Eneida was operating, analyzing, or maintaining a camouflaged radar station.

"Then we should ask her," Thora suggested.

Rhodan looked around at the group. Tschubai nodded, and Chaktor agreed too.

"I don't have her private address," Rhodan said. "We could check the clinic. Maybe she's there, or maybe someone knows where to find her."

"All of us?" Thora asked. "We're practically an army."

They agreed on Rhodan and Tschubai.

Tschubai smirked. "Because of our calm and placid appearance."

The two humans went on foot. The cool of the evening was pleasant; the day's warmth rising out of the walls still moderated it.

Rhodan kept catching himself carefully drawing air into his nose to check if it smelled of peppermint.

No one stopped them at the entrance. Firzay, the woman with the monocle, was sitting on her stool, clad in her shabby gray livery as ever. With a twitch of her face, she gripped the monocle tighter.

They found Eneida in Bull's room. The medic reacted with no surprise and only looked up briefly from her checks.

"How's he doing?" Rhodan asked.

"Worse," she said. "We're giving him artificial ventilation. His heart's beating too quickly and needs support. It's only performing at eighty-three percent now."

"What do you recommend?"

"I don't know," she said quietly. "His entire glandular system is out of whack. He's extremely alarmed, practically in a panic. With all his might, he wants to—I don't know what. If we let him regain consciousness, if we stop administering the sedative agents..." She made a helpless gesture.

She can't do anything for him, Rhodan realized. *Which leaves only one option.* "Is it possible for you to wake Sue?"

"The girl?" She considered it a moment. "The man is robust and, if I'm not mistaken, physically trained. Neither of those is true of the girl. Her resilience is far lower."

"Wake her up," Rhodan said.

"I don't take orders from you," the Ferron answered. "I don't take orders from anyone anymore."

"So you do your work here and in the hidden radar station on a voluntary basis, then?"

"The radar station?" she said. "Do you think you have me because of that?"

Rhodan fell silent.

She continued, "The radar station's not secret—just camouflaged."

"To hide it from possible attackers?" Rhodan asked. "Attackers from Karbush?"

"Ganashar's not an island of the blessed," Eneida said. "Maybe it's just the least miserable place out of many miserable places." She briefly closed her eyes. "In the dark days, when I was young, I saw miserable places. Ruined cities. Wreckages. Battlefields. And in these miserable places, people badly injured and worse. Would you like to hear details?"

"No."

"I was one of the ones they patched together. A member of the organic repair commandos that the soldiers were tasked with making operational again. An amputation here, a prosthesis there, a few transplants—it turned three battered and broken Ferrons into two that work again. Then you give them the stuff that clouds their memories, along with a pinch of neural messenger that makes them eager to fight and makes all scruples fade. As for pain, the nerves are a network that's easy to dupe."

"I understand," Rhodan said.

"Not likely," Eneida replied. "Or have you experienced how rapidly life lost all value in those days? How cheap it was? How Ferrons were made into biogenic patchworks? Do you know why I live here and not on Ferrol or some other peaceful world?"

"Tell me."

"Because I have too good a memory. Because on the cleaned and polished streets of Thorta, I still see the shadows of the corpses that have been cleared away. Because..." She went silent, and Rhodan let her be silent. "I don't take orders anymore."

"And the Omenfather?"

"The Omenfather? I won't give you any lectures on the sociology of Ganashar's community," she said. "You wouldn't understand it anyway." She drew a deep breath. "You're not Ferrons."

"I always thought understanding was related to understanding, not skin and hair color. Or genetic structure."

"How easily we deceive ourselves," Eneida said.

"So, you don't take any orders, which I couldn't issue to you anyway," Rhodan said. "You don't want to see anyone die anymore. You guard and protect the sleepers. And you'd like it best if gradually, every inhabitant of Ganashar—in fact, let's say all of Ambur, the entire Vega system, could be delivered into the healing house. Then you could put them all into a restorative sleep, and they could sleep, sleep away their lives, well guarded and protected by Omenmother Eneida, master of life and death."

"That's not fair," she said bitterly.

"It wasn't fair," he admitted. "But the inaction you expect of me is also unfair." He heard her grinding her teeth.

"You have a reason why I should wake up the girl, not the man?"

“Yes,” Rhodan said, adding after a brief hesitation, “Sue is a para-psychically gifted young woman. If there’s anyone I trust to fight against what’s tormenting them, it’s her. If she develops a picture of what it is, at least.”

“And you mean to give her this picture?”

“I’ll try.”

“Good,” Eneida said, backing down. “Then she has a chance.”

“Yes,” Rhodan said, and put as much conviction into the word as he could muster.

“I’m delivering a cocktail of ephedrine derivatives and other sympathomimetics,” the medic explained less than a quarter of an hour later in Sue’s room. “These will imitate adrenaline and noradrenaline. I’ll also administer some morphine for the pain and a few…special additives.” She smiled absently. “It’s no ordinary medicine. More like my own composition. One I hoped never to have to use again.”

“And Sue will wake up? She’ll be fully conscious?” Rhodan wanted to be sure.

Eneida didn’t reply. She placed the injection gun against Sue’s upper arm and pressed. It made a barely audible hiss. The medic took a step back from Sue’s bed, almost colliding with Tschubai, who mumbled an apology.

At first, nothing happened. The girl lay motionless. Then, she opened her eyes, slowly and without moving her head.

“Hello, Sue,” Rhodan said in a friendly tone. “Can you hear me?”

“Yeah,” she said.

“How are you doing?”

“Not good. I don’t like thinking. It grates. When I think, I think myself sore. It’s like sand is rubbing against my thoughts. I have to go. Back. As quickly as possible. Into safety.”

“Listen to me,” Rhodan said. “The Fantan installed a security system in you and Reginald to prevent you from escaping. That’s the reason you want to *go back*. Do you understand?”

“Yes.”

“It’s a machine made of tiny pieces. This machine is what’s triggering the pain and discomfort.”

“What should I do?”

“Try to sense this machine. It’s unimaginably small, and there’s

nothing alive about it. It's not even a virus."

"I'm supposed to look for something dead inside me," Sue said. "And then what?"

"Destroy it," Rhodan said. "Make it harmless."

"I'll go looking," she said, closing her eyes again.

Rhodan could watch as beads of sweat formed on her forehead and then merged together into a film. He noticed Eneida's fascinated gaze—Ferrons couldn't sweat.

Sue's body tensed. She began to rear up. Her hands clenched. Rhodan took her left hand, carefully unfurled the fingers, put his hand inside, then let her fingernails dig into his skin.

He nodded to Tschubai. The teleporter positioned himself by the bed so he could slide his hand under Sue's neck—an effort to put his paramental abilities at her disposal.

Time passed.

"I have it," Sue murmured at one point. "I have it, but not all of it. I'm getting it."

Eneida was keeping an eye on the various monitors. She was reading Sue's breath frequency and depth, the performance of her heart and kidneys.

It went on for over an hour. Sue's sweat pooled on Rhodan's hand too. The room smelled wet, of exertion and salt. Eneida ran a cool gauze cloth over the girl's forehead.

Suddenly, Sue sat up, coughed and choked, then it burst out of her. She spat something onto the floor, a small handful of some gelatinous mass with a network of fine grayish black threads running through it. A strange odor rose up from the mass, akin to burned hair and hot iron. Rhodan felt sick for a moment, but the smell was fleeting and soon dissipated.

"It's not over yet," Sue said. "It's still fighting back. If only I weren't so tired." She smiled at Tschubai. "Thanks, by the way."

Rhodan looked at Eneida as if prompting him. The Ferron sighed and prepared a second dose, no smaller than the first. "I have my doubts," she said.

Rhodan gestured toward Sue. "We can't let the machinery inside her regenerate. Or repair itself. Please hurry."

Eneida gave him an angry look but put the injection gun to Sue's skin again. There was another light hissing sound, and then Sue gave an unfathomably deep sigh. She sank against Tschubai's hand, and the battle started raging again.

It took hours. She spat out that strange mass three more times. Eneida picked up the clumps of slime with a spoon and deposited them into transparent boxes, utensil and all. Rhodan advised her to destroy the gelatinous substance as thoroughly as possible.

Finally, Sue murmured, “Sue versus Fantan: one-nil.” Her body lay still. She was breathing deeply with relief. After a while, she asked, “And Reginald?”

Rhodan looked at Eneida briefly. The medic made a deeply defensive gesture and said, with a voice that practically begged for mercy, “She’s exhausted. Far too exhausted.”

With great effort, Sue sat up, resting first on one elbow, then both. “Help me,” she said. “We have to go.”

Rhodan grasped her under the shoulders and knees and lifted her up. Smelling her clammy hair against his chin, he carried her to Bull’s room. Tschubai followed. Sue indicated for him to pull a chair up to Bull’s bed, and he did.

Rhodan sat her down. She leaned forward and rested her head against Bull’s chest.

“Ras?” she asked. Tschubai made physical contact with her again as she concentrated. “It’s hard,” she murmured after a while.

Rhodan looked at Eneida, who had been watching in silence. “Give her something.”

“No,” she said sharply.

“Give her something!” Rhodan repeated, surprised by his coldness and firmness.

Eneida left the room. When Rhodan had given up hope, she came back with two injection guns. She pressed one against Bull’s jugular vein. The light hissing followed. She held out the second pistol to Rhodan. “It’s nothing to do with me anymore,” she said. “Your decision alone.”

Rhodan took the instrument, pressed it into Sue’s upper arm, and activated it. Eneida watched. He handed the gun back to her, and she took it.

“You’d make a perfect Omenfather,” she said.

Rhodan turned away and looked questioningly at Sue.

“I’ll get started,” the girl whispered.

Vega had just started to pour its early blue-white stormlight over the horizon when Sue lifted her head a few millimeters from Bull’s chest. She’d driven the grayish black nanosubstance through

Bull's eye socket and made it drain out with his tear fluid. Watery shadows stained Bull's cheekbones, as if eyeliner had run down from his eyes.

"Okay," she said. "Done."

Tschubai looked bleary. Rhodan and Eneida had spoken only sporadically in the last few hours. They'd exchanged a few words about the settlement's isolated location, the radar station, the deployments to the fields. Anything to avoid staying silent the entire time.

Sue's "okay" was a blessed relief.

Rhodan slid his hand under her face to support it. It felt cool. She tried to smile. "If we see the Fantan again..." She considered a moment. "Let's put them in groups of three or four and tie them together with bicycle locks." At last, the smile found her face. "Like a bundle of carrots. That'll teach 'em."

"You wouldn't do it," he replied. "You have far too much of a good heart."

"Not Bull," she said. "Reg would do it. He doesn't have a heart. He's evil. He'd do that thing with the lock. And then he'd give me the key." She made a languid hand gesture.

"And you'd throw it away?"

"No," she said, looking at him emphatically. "Much better. Ebay."

"They're sleeping now," Eneida said. The three were sitting in a small room, a mixture of office, treatment space, and medicine storage. "They'll be asleep for a long time. I gave both of them an infusion. Two days. At least."

"Aye," Rhodan said.

Eneida laughed. The laugh changed her face almost completely. Where it was usually almost flat and even, it gained a unique depth now. She pulled out the two clasps that had been holding her hair off her forehead, then shook her hair out. Her dark eyes...the metallic arches of her brows...

Rhodan laughed too. How familiar Ferron faces were to him by now. All the while, he was dealing with dead people, beings who had died thousands of years ago, and he wandered among them like a deep-sea diver in a scaphander on the bottom of the sea.

Only, the living world didn't notice the diving suit. And now and again, he forgot about it himself.

Eneida quickly grew serious again. “Let’s leave it at that. I assume you want to go to work.”

Rhodan nodded. “Of course.” He gave Tschubai a wink.

The athletic man stood up. Rhodan felt an urge to reveal all to the Ferron—specifically Tschubai’s ability. But he quickly abandoned this thought.

They said goodbye to Eneida and stepped out into the hallway. The monocled woman had apparently stayed awake there all night. She raised her head sleepily. Rhodan greeted her with a nod.

The streets were still largely deserted. Once, they encountered a stocky Ferron woman in a mail shirt. She walked across the street markedly slowly and with half-closed eyes, inhaling the cool morning air through her nose and holding a Sharctash in front of her with both hands like a balance pole.

Rhodan and Tschubai parted ways with the expectation of soon seeing each other again on the fields. Yinye met him upon his arrival. As a greeting, she briefly laid her head against his chest. She asked where he had been, and he told her. However, in his version, Sue played only a small role; he made Eneida into the real hero. The feeling of deceiving her was persistently bitter, as if matters between them were getting more and more off-balance. He’d won two lives; she’d lost Bukk.

He cleared his throat and asked, “And you? Anything new?”

“Nothing new,” she said. “You’ll have heard that the governor is threatening us. Or at least Vela Waygen, his deputy. Governor Garrean himself seems to have disappeared.”

He nodded. “Is that serious?”

“Yes,” she said.

They boarded the bus.

14.

Guall's Daily Business

In his tent near Karbush, the Thort devoted himself to his daily business. Demeris, his first minister, went through the agenda points with him.

On Ferrol, there had been an uprising of angry young men in the city of Troghin, which the city commander had seen fit to clamp down on with great force. As matters escalated, some members of the local police units had fought back on the insurgents' side. There were many injured to mourn; one of the rebels was still in critical condition.

"A mere trifle," Demeris summarized, not fully understanding why the Thort wished to discuss the point.

"If seen from a distance, certainly," Guall conceded. "Up close, for the casualties' parents, children, or life partners, it can look completely different."

Demeris audibly blew air out of her nose. "Do you mean to sit at every sickbed one day, Thort? Be everyone's wet nurse, everyone's salvation? I don't recall ever seeing a figure like that outside of the *Litany of the Idols' Unity*."

Her voice sounded amused and mildly reproachful, but Guall recognized the undertone lurking beneath. Demeris was clearly wondering, had he lost all sense of proportion? Was he, the one meant to see the bigger picture and be a leader, being waylaid by mazes of details? Was he still capable of serving as Thort? Or was it high time to appoint a Thorta—a woman like Demeris?

Should he retort that all things, as universal and lofty as they may appear, were comprised of nondescript trifles?

He closed his eyes. It didn't take long to see the young man on Troghin before him, injuries clear on his throat and chest. He saw the machines that kept him breathing and his heart beating. He smelled the room's antiseptic, clinical cleanliness, and—more importantly—the ever so faint, bittersweet scent of the promise

herb that a young woman held in her lap, bundled into a sheaf the size of a hand. The doctors hadn't let her see the injured man. Her glowing face hardly moved, but the Thort could see it wavering between hope and despair. Though it was almost overpowered by the promise herb, he sensed the impossibly delicate aroma of her body, which had hormonally adjusted for pregnancy. Did she already know she was pregnant? He wasn't sure.

But he *was* sure that the anger on the face of the father just entering the clinic, the anger of the uncle, a veteran of the battle for Rofus...that all of this would have consequences. Consequences for the families, for Troghin, and ultimately for all of Ferrol. Assuming he didn't intervene.

So he said, "I'd like the military commander in charge to be drafted to the care of the critically injured man. Immediately after we're finished here. Medical efforts to save him must be doubled. His family must promptly be told by one of my spokespeople that the Thort overlooks and tolerates no injustice."

They talked about budgetary matters, simplifying legislative procedures on a community level, evaluating the efficiency of self-efficacy structures, and other astonishing fruits of a blossoming administration. And since all this served the building of a peaceful world, both presupposing and creating peace, Guall enjoyed the discussion about these items very much.

The list concluded with a personnel matter that Demeris treated as incidental: a directorial position needed filling at the Bhangis military academy. Two candidates had been short-listed from the committee responsible. Their names were Tagusec and Shebter. Tagusec was, the Thort sensed, the one Demeris favored.

The Bhangis military academy specialized in the development of new weapon systems. Whoever was appointed director would be able to set the course of development in this field.

Time to take a closer look at each of them.

"Let's take a short break," the Thort said, smiling. "Would you like something to drink?"

Vocotósh brought a jug of water for the minister and a tube of twilight wine for Guall.

The Thort stepped out of the tent with the cup in his hand, and Vocotósh followed, carrying a plain folding chair. Guall sat, sipped at the cup, and closed both eyes.

It didn't take long to find Shebter. The Ferron was sitting in a

roof garden; in front of him stood a low wooden tub filled a handspan deep with water. He was watching a child, four or five years old, who had mounted small sticks onto a few Cevces leaves to serve as masts. Scraps of cloth were stuck to the sticks as sails. The child blew, chubby-cheeked, driving his fleet across the tiny sea. Now and then, one of the little ships threatened to capsize in the tempest.

Shebter gave no advice. He just kept watch, leaning forward slightly. Guall sensed that the man was no great genius. The possibility of being appointed director of the academy excited and terrified him in equal measure.

He drew back and looked for Tagusec. The corpulent man pushed his belly in front of himself like a comfortable ball. He hummed a melody as he switched on his computer. The screen went bright, and Tagusec took a seat, stretched luxuriously, and called up some data. Notes about ideas, blueprints, cutaway diagrams.

The brilliance of Tagusec's discoveries and visions almost blinded Guall. As the scientist moved the cursor with one hand, calling up data, opening, and dragging, he threw open an old fiber sheet book with the other. It was a vintage copy of the *Litany of the Idols' Unity*. The tune he was humming grew more buoyant. He found the passage he was looking for in the *Litany*, cheerfully rapped against it with a knuckle, and recited it to his own melody:

I have become the pure one, holy and freed from suffering
When I raise my mighty hand, it smashes into shards
The world, and the shards full of fragrant blood,
I raise to my iron mouth and drink.

Tagusec closed the book, spiritedly beat his hand against its back, and thundered, "To my, my iron mouth and drink, drink, drink."

Guall opened both of his other eyes, blinked, took another sip of twilight wine, stood up with a groan, and went back into the tent. Demeris looked at him expectantly.

"Shebter will be the new director," Guall announced.

"With all due respect," Demeris answered, "I consider Tagusec the more suitable candidate. He's a gifted weapon maker. A visionary."

"Yes," Guall agreed. "He is indeed. But I think Shebter is a

better administrator."

"How inspirational for the academy," Demeris said, full of sarcasm.

Guall gave her a friendly smile. "It's decided."

Once Demeris had left, Guall needed to rest. Since the end of the war, meetings like this had been part of his routine. As had large-scale conferences, of course, with more ministers, secretaries of state, and specialist consultants.

Whenever possible, however, he preferred a smaller circle. That made it easier to feign a certain privacy, to set a framework that allowed him to lean back or draw back and shut his eyes as if in tired self-absorption.

Sometimes, he imagined how his colleagues would react if they knew that the Thort went on his own unique kind of expedition as soon as he closed his eyes and was even more absent than assumed by those who took him for a tired, run-down, and absentminded old man.

At the same time, the Thort was *present* like no one else in the Vega system. When he closed his two ordinary eyes, he saw with his third. When he opened that third eye, his spirit transformed into a camera obscura with the entire cosmos of Vega projected inside it. All distances were superseded. He saw what was happening in the most remote places in the solar system—and whatever he saw, he also heard, smelled, and felt.

A guideline of a nature still incomprehensible to Guall led him to where events were more seminal than elsewhere: a visually imperceptible tremor emanated from these events, from the people who moved in these zones of increased importance. Many a future calamity pupating in the cocoon of the present loomed so clearly that he couldn't understand the blindness that struck the other Ferrons. It was hard to imagine how Demeris had overlooked the calamity that Tagusec threatened.

Or were these risks known to her? Was she aware that Tagusec's reflections on neural weapons, on pain effectors, endangered the world and would have ultimately brought a disaster like none before bearing down on the system? Guall had known for a long time that the first minister had ambitions of succeeding him. She was clever; her ability to anticipate bordered on prophetic. She was still calming herself with her patience and believed she could

wait for Guall's death and let things come to her afterward.

She didn't know how much of that patience had already run out—how close she was to panic that it could already be too late, she could already be too old. Only rarely, in deep dreams, did she sense the anger that was inexorably growing inside her and would one day soon wash every scruple away.

But she didn't know about the prions that were stirring and multiplying in her brain, about those diligent, unwavering, and formless structures that were free from all desire and fear, that didn't want anything or know anything, that were nothing but a cloud of proteins. She was still only wondering about her decreasing need for sleep. Indeed, she believed it a sign of rousing vitality. Soon, however, her gait would change, falter, and she would start to dream in the middle of the day while wide awake, irrevocably drawn back into her shimmering dreamworld, there behaving as though she had returned to reality. It wouldn't take long after that.

Death enters our lives in such ghostly costumes, Guall thought.

When Demeris had left him this evening, hugging him as she so often did and generously sharing her body heat with him, he had closed his two eyes and looked through her skull with his third. He'd observed the huge, microscopic turmoil in her neural tissue that had long since irreversibly ruined the core of her being. What had she whispered? "Sleep well, Thort. You must take care of yourself. Don't cause me any heartache."

He had smiled at her and said, "Soon, you'll have forgotten about all heartache for me."

Vocotósh came and changed Guall's diaper. The Thort was physically drained. He would sleep. While he slept, his mind would patrol the Vega system, vigilantly reading omens in the fabric of the present. But eventually, when his mind was finally worn out as well, he would start to dream like any mortal Ferron.

He feared that same dream as much as he longed for it. He would be hanging from the beam again, the rope coiled around his arm. Shenidin would ask whether he still wanted to kiss her, and just as he had for an eternity, he would answer: *"Yes."*

15.

Rhodan's Nighttime Chats

It was a strangely balmy day. Work proceeded slowly; the Ferrons' hearts didn't seem to be in it. Yinye stood upright and tense on the loading platform and left all the real work to Rhodan. Every so often, he heard her knocking against the floor with her Sharctash in a nervous cadence. It was as if a sense of expectation hung in the air.

However, the day passed largely without event, leaving aside a rain shower that descended on the fields and hung over the settlement for a while like a softly billowing veil, and the silvery point that passed across the sky at a height of ten or twelve kilometers shortly after the clouds had receded. Per Rhodan's estimation, it passed exactly over the caldera. A recon missile from Karbush? He noticed Yinye briefly looking up at this point and pounding threateningly against the platform with the Sharctash twice, three times. But she didn't say a word, and he didn't ask her about this phenomenon.

On the way back, they agreed that Tschubai would visit Sue and Bull on his own. Thora planned to go on an evening walk through Ganashar with Rae-Edzo, her host. Along the way, she wanted to discover what escape methods the settlement offered—road vehicles, or better yet, aircraft with a pressurized cabin. Getting to Karbush on foot was out of the question. That would require special equipment for everyone involved.

In the worst case, Tschubai would have to transport them. But right now, Rhodan didn't feel the group was in urgent, life-threatening danger. Chaktor remained silent about affairs in the building where he was being housed, but Rhodan didn't want to pry.

Once he and Yinye had reached their apartment, the Ferron retreated to her room after a one-syllable goodbye. Rhodan lay on his bed and closed his eyes. He thought of Earth, of Homer G.

Adams, then—for reasons unknown—of a bugbear from his early school days. As a kid, he hadn't understood why Alaska was part of the US when it was clearly so far away and attached to Canada, and in Geography, he'd gotten more and more outraged over this effrontery. "You can't just cut up the world like a tailor with scissors!" he'd shouted once, then crossed his arms over his chest and lowered his head.

As if by way of punishment, a white, shapeless, threadlike creature had appeared in a wayward dream that night, cutting the world up with a monstrous pair of scissors and then sewing it back together in a new configuration. He himself had been sitting somewhere outside these events, in a place that partly resembled a rock needle, partly the treehouse his father had built for him. And he'd thought, *So this is my place. So far apart.* In the dream, this insight had tormented him and uplifted him in equal measure. And as if this decades-old dream still exerted its own peculiar gravity, it drew him into sleep.

He didn't feel like he'd been sleeping long when something woke up. Someone was knocking hard against the door. *Yinye,* he thought.

He stood up, drowsily walked over to the door, and opened it. In the doorway stood Tschubai and Sue.

Rhodan silently hugged the girl. The three of them sat on the bed and spoke in subdued voices. Rhodan asked about Bull.

"He's doing great. Strong enough to uproot trees. Earlier, he gave Eneida a marriage proposal. He thinks she's sweet and calls her his sugar cube."

"It's the side effects of the medication," Tschubai added, running a hand through the girl's hair. "He tried to get up and got into a scuffle with our medic. She ordered him to have one more day of bed rest, and he gave her a vivid picture of what he thinks of the local health care system."

"One more day, then," Rhodan said.

Tschubai was about to say something else but instead raised his hand. There were noises outside, as if someone was there, trying to keep quiet. Then someone stepped into the building. Moments later, an imperious knock came at the bedroom door.

Tschubai took Sue by the arm and pulled her to the wall, where they wouldn't be directly visible from the doorway. Rhodan went

over to the door and opened it.

Three Ferrons stood outside. They were armed. Two of them, standing a few paces back, held projectile weapons in their hands, a mixture of revolver and short-barreled rifle.

The group's leader carried his weapon in a holster. He scrutinized Rhodan, patiently and curiously. Then he said, "Come with me. The Omenfather wishes to speak with you."

The vehicle waiting on a side street looked like it had been ripped out of a fairy tale. It resembled a white carriage on four tall, spiraling wheels. The material it was made of was unknown to him, but if a mixture of mother-of-pearl and aluminum was possible, that was what it looked like. He couldn't see any windows or draft animals and assumed it used an electric motor.

The cabin opened. The Ferrons behind him gestured him in.

A prison van, Rhodan thought with annoyance. He held on to the doorframe with both hands and pulled himself inside. One bench on the left, another on the right. The right-hand bench was empty, and on the left sat the Omenfather.

"Sit, citizen," said the bald Ferron.

Rhodan sat. He leaned back and took a thorough look at the Omenfather. The man really was short, making his already large skull seem even more enormous. He wore the black two-piece buttoned right up to the top. The buttons that had appeared to glow red during his public appearance at Ganarzynes Square had died out by now, but every one of them was fastened.

The Omenfather let Rhodan's scrutiny wash over him in silence and with a touch of amusement. Then he asked, "Which side are you on, citizen?"

"What are the options?"

"The side of the Thort and his regime. The side of Governor Garrean. My side. The side of Ganashar."

"Four sides, then," Rhodan said.

"Three," the Omenfather corrected him. "My side and that of Ganashar are identical. Or are there other sides in play that I'm not aware of?"

"I'd ideally like you to see me and my companions as mere bystanders. We're not here to stay. We won't take a position."

The Omenfather smiled thinly. "A comfortable attitude for someone who would be long dead by now if one of our medics

hadn't taken a stand."

"We've expressed our gratitude. We've worked without complaint and as a matter of course to settle any possible debt."

"Do you know the Thort?"

Rhodan pondered a moment. "Let's say, I knew him once."

"He's as old as a mushroom," the Omenfather said. "And like a mushroom, he stands there bent over and motionless. At the same time, his hyphal network is burrowing deeper and deeper into the earth and spreading out endlessly far."

"Some say he brought freedom to the Vega system."

"Do they, now?" the Omenfather mused. "That would make him a hero." He rubbed a hand thoughtfully against his bare skull. "What would you say, Citizen Rhodan, if I took you for a spy for the 'prince of peace'?"

"I'd say that I'm no such thing."

"I'm not all-seeing, all-hearing, and all-tasting like they say the Thort is. But people bring me news. Nighttime visits to a healing house. Conspiratorial meetings in the homes of blameless, peaceful Ganasharans. Walks that strangely don't lead to the shores of the caldera's lake, but to the settlement's motor pools and airports."

Thora, Rhodan thought. *The Omenfather's people are watching us. Or Rae-Edzo and others are spying on us.* He said, "We want to get to Karbush. Not to share information about Ganashar there, but to leave Ambur."

The expression on the Ferron's face shifted, quickly showing surprise, revulsion, disbelief, and sheer derision one after the other. "I wonder if you know what you're saying, Citizen Rhodan."

"The truth. That's less complicated for me than a tangled lie."

"We have a few supporters in Karbush. Ferrons who don't agree with Guall's all-encompassing peace regime. I've been interpreting the omens for more than just a few short years. I have no doubt that the Thort is allowing certain powers and forces to infiltrate the Vega system—indeed, that he's prepared to hand over all of Ferron civilization to these aliens for, I don't know, some fee or another. He'll have his own good reasons for that, no doubt. And he'll have his excuses to hide these good reasons from the general public. Dispute it if you can, citizen."

Rhodan stayed silent. He'd have been interested to know which "omens" the Ferron was speaking of.

The Omenfather said, "Tomorrow, you will provide information

to me in front of all of Ganashar, Citizen. Tomorrow, because tomorrow is a decisive day. Our supporters in Karbush have informed us that the Amburan government will take action against us in the next few days." He leaned even farther forward, almost touching Rhodan's ear with his mouth. "But we'll be taking action of our own."

The war is beginning, Rhodan thought.

16.

Garrean's Path into the Mountains

They planned to set off before sunrise. Garrean and Shim slept deeply and well. Okpata's storage chamber was a very different sight than his ascetically barren living space. Four or five mechanical prospectors sat in a pile, their thin, spidery legs irrevocably tangled together.

Okpata gave them two breathing masks, silky smooth undergarments, down-filled jackets and pants, and tactile and sure-footed shoes with semiautomatic climbing aids. In Garrean's case, Okpata simply reached for the shelf and pulled out a pair that fit. Shim had to try on various pairs to find the right ones. He put on the climbing aids' clips and made himself familiar with the control panel just below his knee. He had to bend down a little, but that was fine. To test them out, he made the steel tongues push out of the soles and watched as the tongues' tips separated and spread out. Everything was in working order.

Okpata packed up a rope, carabiners, nuts, sliding anchors, and finally a crossbow made of thin metal that could fire solid, self-spreading throwing anchors attached to a silk climbing cord.

They set out.

Garrean and Shim went as far as they reasonably could with the car. As they crossed a Jinwar meadow, the animals gawked at them without much ceremony.

After a journey of almost two hours, they had to leave the car behind. They got out, got dressed up, put on their breathing masks and the backpacks with their provisions, attached the oxygen bottles, and started the climb.

Vega rose, the sun flinging its light into the air like gemstones to set the sky over Ambur on fire. They paused as Garrean watched the spectacle with reverence, holding his breath. Shim marveled at the lavish beauty of the world. For a moment, he took off his breathing mask and glasses. If Vega was unveiling itself, he wanted

to see it directly.

But the air was cold and very thin already, so he put his glasses and the mask back on again.

They climbed onward.

Three hours later, they stopped to rest on a balcony-like outcrop with fist-sized snow troughs. They looked down and could see the Fanshyc farm far below, the Meyktalar's winding band glimmering in Vega's light, as silvery as if it had been poured from palladium, the true, unrivaled bonanza of the Baylor. In the distance, Shim could see a pack of Shoumars hunting a stray Jinwar calf. Within minutes, they had taken it down.

They drank. Garrean filled a processing bottle with snow, then disposed of the filter membrane and put in a new one before they left again.

Garrean's altimeter worked barometrically; Shim's tablet used the impulses of geostationary navigation satellites. Both agreed unanimously on a height of 965 meters. They were well into the death zone by now.

An hour later came the next rest spot. They drank again, and this time Garrean had to urge Shim to join him.

"I'm not thirsty," Shim objected.

"But you know what'll happen if you don't have enough."

"Yes," Shim said. "Yes, yes, yes." He drank.

It grew cloudy. The clouds, almost as fine as thread at first, thickened to leaden streaks of steam. Shim called up the weather report on his tablet. "It's going to rain," he informed the governor.

Garrean looked up. The walls of the Gaungash massif towered above them. If Shim's tablet had calculated correctly, the cylinder would appear significantly below the summit, namely at a height of about twelve hundred meters. The massif's ridge rose to an enormous thirty-five hundred meters—an obstacle that the weighty clouds wouldn't be able to overcome.

Garrean and Shim worked their way upward. A steep, almost vertical stretch rose above them. Garrean placed the chocks into small crevices, and they spread out. Shim was amazed by Garrean's confidence. It was as if the governor had done nothing else in his life but climb mountains.

At one point, Shim slid down and hung by the rope. He swung back and forth like the pendulum of an archaic clock, but Garrean

effortlessly kept hold of him, letting him finish swinging to find purchase and a grip on the stone again.

Above them, the wall reached an overhang. The top wasn't wide, a meter perhaps, but to Shim it looked insurmountable. Garrean reached for the crossbow and loaded it with a throwing anchor. Then he braced his feet against the granite, drove the steel tongues out, and waited until they had found a foothold in the rocks. He held the rope that was secured in the rock with his left hand and abseiled backward, centimeter by centimeter, until he lay almost horizontal in the air, his legs unnaturally tensed due to the steel tongues. He aimed with the crossbow, which he held in his right hand, and shot the anchor into the air.

The anchor disappeared beyond the overhang, fiber cord and all. Shim heard a light clanking sound as the metal landed on stone, a dragging sound, then silence. The cord went taut with a bang, and Garrean secured the crossbow to his back and pulled himself up, hand over hand, until he was out of sight. Then he hoisted Shim up after him.

Although Shim had hardly contributed to overcoming the outcrop at all, he was out of breath. The top of it led to an almost ten-meter-wide, almost horizontal surface—a place to rest.

They lay on their backs. Then they had something to drink. Garrean scraped some snow together from a few crevices and filled the processing bottle with it. Shim listened to the sound of the pumps that sucked in air and compressed it. It did him good to hear the sound of the machines that ensured his survival.

"Onward?" Garrean asked. Shim stood up.

An hour or so later, they reached the destination that Shim's tablet had calculated. The clouds had grown even denser. In the distance, they saw the dark trail of rain plumes above the Baylor. The cloud bank grew ever darker, black, and a few minutes later, it had taken their sight.

Water splashed onto their faces, and they pressed themselves tightly against the rock wall. Distant thunder rolled in, lightning flashing two or three times.

Then the storm passed. The steaming plumes peeled away and revealed an incalculably large body that hung in air, cobalt blue, with no sound or motion. The material it was made of looked like a varnish, almost like glass, only not see-through.

To Shim, it felt as though he could reach out his hand and

touch the hull from which rain ran in torrents.

"Fifty meters," he heard Garrean whisper. "Maybe sixty. It's no farther away than that."

They had to be facing the center of the phenomenon; to the left and right, the cylinder disappeared amid the cloud smoke.

"How did it get here?" Shim asked. "I didn't hear anything. Not a sound."

"Not a sound," Garrean confirmed, as if the words were an incantation.

But why summon a demon that's already floating right in front of our eyes?

Shim tried to think analytically. They were clearly looking at the upper portion of the cylinder. He therefore couldn't rule out propulsion units, hatches, ducts, antennae, or anything else existing outside of their vision—technical structures that would make plain that they were dealing with a machine, not an apparition.

The cylinder likely exceeded anything that Ferron technology could produce. Good. That meant its producers were technically superior to the Ferrons. No reason to treat this object with archaic reverence.

Gradually, the veil of clouds dissolved.

Garrean took a few steps onto the outcrop, then got down on the ground and crawled to the edge. There he lay. Shim remained standing.

"Come and take a look at this!" Garrean insisted after a while.

Soon, Shim was lying shoulder to shoulder with Garrean, looking down.

The cylinder wasn't hanging idly in the air. In its hull, some oval-shaped doorways had opened. What for? Was something going to be ejected from them? Or had it been already? But what? And why?

Then they both felt it. An endlessly subtle tremor ran through the rocks, the mountain, the entire massif—a barely detectable shaking. The center of the quake seemed to be directly below them.

"I'll take a look," Garrean said. "You hold my legs and I'll look over the edge."

"Doesn't sound like a brilliant idea to me," Shim said. "I don't know if I can hold you."

"Hmm. Do you have a better idea?"

"I'll look," Shim proposed. "You hold my legs."

Shim waited until the steel tongues from Garrean's shoes had found purchase in the rock and were anchored there. He felt his companion's firm grip on his ankles. Shortly thereafter, he swung headfirst over the abyss and cursed his courage.

"Do you see anything?" Garrean called.

"Yes," Shim called back.

Suddenly, Shim felt his body being pulled up. Something tore him from Garrean's grasp, slid him up and away from the governor and toward the rock wall high above. He tried to put his arms in front of his face, but it all occurred too quickly.

And then he was smashed against the stone.

Slowly, Shim regained consciousness. Garrean's eyes were right in front of his face. "Hello," he heard Garrean say. "Don't be alarmed. I'm going to take your breathing mask off for a moment."

Shim had an urge to fight against this, but couldn't muster the energy. Then the mask was gone. Shim watched as Garrean pressed the mask against his face and breathed in deeply and greedily. Shim grasped that this was actually the governor's mask. His own must have been damaged in the collision. Or destroyed. *Which means I'm going to die,* he soberly assessed.

Garrean removed the mask and put it over Shim's mouth again. Shim breathed deeply, consciously. "They're hollowing out the mountain," Shim explained. "I don't know how, but they are. And as they're hollowing it out, they're filling it in again. As it's if they're operating on the mountain. They're pulling off its skin—the rocks, that is—and immediately replacing it with...something else, but something that doesn't differ at all. I..."

"Relax," Garrean said. He sounded more concerned than Shim would have liked. Most likely, the governor thought he was talking nonsense, that perhaps his mind was addled due to the impact. Or the lack of oxygen.

"It's just as I'm telling you," Shim whispered. "It's the truth. I just don't know the right words for it."

"I understand," Garrean said wanly. "I believe you."

Despite Garrean's opposition, Shim lifted up the mask and handed it to the governor.

Garrean took it and drew air. "It doesn't make any sense," he said. "None of it makes any sense at all."

Shim tilted his head back. Above him, the Gaungash massif's rock wall towered above him like a finger pointing into infinity.

Strangely, he couldn't help thinking of Okpata's worms, those creatures entirely without need, with no mouths or digestive systems. Maybe you just needed to be free of all needs, and then you could live anywhere.

Garrean pressed the mask back onto Shim. "Stand up!" he said. "I want to try something out."

Shim breathed, then stood. Every fiber of his being was racked with pain. Garrean put Shim's arm around his shoulder and carried him to the overhang's edge. Then he set Shim down and took the mask again. He reached for the crossbow, loaded it with a throwing anchor, and aimed at the cobalt-blue cylinder.

He's gone insane, Shim thought. *He's trying to shoot them down.*

Garrean pulled the trigger. The bolt with the anchor darted toward the cylinder, pulling the almost invisible fiber robe behind it. Shim heard a bright buzzing in the air that quickly grew quiet. Only then did he realize what Garrean had aimed for. The arrow disappeared into one of the oval-shaped openings.

"You're crazy," Shim said.

The anchor must have found purchase, because the cord went taut. Garrean fumbled with the crossbow. The butt unfolded into a metal tripod, which the governor soon fixed into the rock. Using a carabiner hook, he connected his belt to the cord, which led down into the cylinder's hangar at a shallow angle.

"What are you waiting for?" he called to Shim.

"You can't be serious."

"We won't make it back to the plain—either we die here, or we take our chances over there."

"Who says the air is even breathable in there?" Shim answered.

"No one. But the air here certainly isn't."

Garrean let Shim go first and helped him clip in. Then he supplied him with oxygen again. Shim had never noticed before how sweet oxygen tasted, how pleasant and fulfilling it was. He could picture doing nothing else for the rest of his life except sitting somewhere in Karbush and breathing.

Garrean gave him a push. The ground went out from under his feet and he slid toward the cylinder.

Shim sat there and breathed deeply in and out. The atmosphere was clearly rich in oxygen. He looked at Garrean. The governor had taken off the breathing mask and was just releasing the anchor's

adhesive plate from the airlock's floor. He touched the sensor button on the crossbow's base, and the fiber cord rolled up with a soft whirring sound. The hangar was halfway between a square and a circle. The four walls, each maybe thirty or forty paces long, bulged outward slightly. Where they should have formed into corners, they bent sharply in on each other instead.

"As if the designer was trying to square the circle," Shim said, adjusting his glasses.

"And not succeeding."

"How comforting."

The inner walls had no doors. They were a not entirely uniform, slightly washed-out shade of blue, almost skin color. At about waist height, half-oval basins jutted out of the walls. Some were filled with water, others not.

Garrean cupped his hand and scooped some water out of one of the basins.

"I wouldn't drink that," Shim said.

"Good idea. Then don't do it," Garrean advised before taking a sip.

"Well? How does it taste?"

"Like water."

"Interesting."

The exits were located in the ceiling and floor. A continuous spiral of stainless steel wound through the room, with stairs made of glass panes within.

"It sort of reminds me of a DNA model," Shim said.

"How nice for you."

"Are we going up or down?"

"Always up."

Garrean went first. He tested the first glass surface. It had no sharp edges, and was somewhat cloudy, a bit like ice. But entirely unlike ice, it provided firm footing and gave way very slightly, not at all unpleasantly. It bore his weight without any difficulty. He went up three steps, then four, before pausing and looking down. Due to the translucent surfaces and their bluish tinge, he couldn't see how deep the staircase spiraled. But it wouldn't have surprised him if there had been ten or twelve floors.

Step by step, he proceeded. Shim followed him.

They reached the room above. It was circular. At a height of around thirty meters, the bluish wall gradually changed into a

transparent dome that arched over the room. They saw a procession of high clouds.

"How can we see clouds here?" Shim wondered aloud. "This dome can't be anywhere near the cylinder's highest point. It's somewhere on the side."

"Let's find out what else we can see," Garrean said, indicating for Shim to assist him.

Shim sighed. He leaned against the wall and arranged his hands so that Garrean could step onto them and, from there, get up onto his shoulders.

"You're heavy," Shim complained.

"But small to make up for it," Garrean consoled him. Now he was standing on Shim's shoulders, but it still wasn't enough. "Take your glasses off!"

Shim sighed again, took his glasses off, and stowed them away. Then he helped Garrean get up onto his head. Garrean balanced there on one foot as Shim grasped him by the ankle and tried to stabilize him.

"What do you see?"

Garrean didn't reply. Shim sighed.

"Just hold me steady," Garrean said quietly.

Shim did. They stood that way for two or three minutes.

"Set me down," Garrean finally said. While climbing down, he somehow managed to hit Shim in the nose twice, first with one knee and then the other.

"What did you see?"

Instead of giving an answer, Garrean went over to the spiral staircase and looked down. "The air lock is closed," he declared.

Shim stepped up next to him. There really was no sign of the hatch anymore. The now seamless outer wall had basins protruding from it at regular intervals, just like the others.

They walked down again.

"What did you see? Or is that some big secret?"

Garrean briefly pursed his lips. "It's just a hologram," he said. "A planet landscape. An image. We could have figured that out, I suppose. We know this room isn't in the cylinder's upper reaches."

"Yeah."

They investigated the outer wall they'd entered from but indeed found not a hint of the hatch.

"Trapped," said Shim.

“In a prison with two exits,” Garrean added, gesturing toward the spiral staircase with his thumb, pointing up and then down.

“One of which leads to a holographic planet.”

“Then let’s take the other one.”

They followed the spiral staircase farther and farther down. The light remained the same, even when they left loop after loop of the tinted steps behind them.

The staircase ran down a circular shaft. There was no railing. Garrean let the fingertips of his left hand slide along the wall. It was smooth and cool and smelled faintly of water.

“How long have we been going for?” Shim asked.

Garrean stopped. He took the pocket watch on its chain out of his shirt pocket and took a look. “A quarter of an hour.”

Shim looked at him with astonishment. He retrieved his own watch and held it up to Garrean’s face. “One hour and ten minutes.”

“You’re ahead of the curve,” Garrean quipped. “Do you need a break?”

“I wonder where this staircase leads.”

“Downward,” Garrean replied.

“Surely we should have reached the bottom of the cylinder by now.”

Garrean considered a moment. “What if the cylinder has artificial gravity? Pulling us ever downward, even if the shaft actually goes in a curve—around the ship’s walls, for example?”

“Why?”

“Why what?”

“Why would it do that? There’s no way out.”

“The exit will be down below somewhere.”

“And if not?” Shim asked.

“Then we’ll turn around.”

“And when will we determine whether to turn around or not?”

“We’ll set ourselves a deadline. Another quarter of an hour.”

“According to my watch or yours?”

Garrean laughed. “We just won’t let the watches out of our sight. Tell me when five minutes have passed.”

They continued their descent.

“Five minutes,” Shim said after a while.

Garrean cast a glance at his own watch. *Five minutes.*

Walking down step after step like this at a steady pace had a

sort of hypnotic buoyancy about it. Garrean hummed softly to himself.

"Fifteen minutes," Shim said.

"You skipped the ten-minute mark," Garrean chided.

"No, I didn't," Shim replied. "I announced it loud and clear."

Garrean looked at his watch. It indicated that forty minutes had passed since they'd continued. "Something's manipulating our watches," he said. "They're worthless. Let's count the steps instead."

"Until when?"

"A hundred?" Garrean proposed.

"Okay," Shim agreed.

Garrean took the first step. Step number two. Three. Four. Five...

"A hundred," he said after a while and stopped.

"Are you sure?" Shim asked.

"Do you have ninety-nine?"

"Thirty-seven," said Shim.

"Hmm." Garrean looked down. The light was unchanged. There was nothing to indicate an end to the shaft. "Let's turn around," he decided.

The ascent felt more difficult. Garrean counted in his head. One hundred. Two hundred. Three hundred.

"I need a break," Shim said. "Please."

He sat down and took off his glasses. Garrean could see that his assistant's hand was faintly trembling.

The governor took out his water bottle and drank a few gulps. He looked upward. It was the same sight as the view down: bluish steps as far as the eye could see.

"Shouldn't we have reached the top a while ago by now?"

"Don't be silly," Garrean answered.

"It's a trap."

"What kind of a trap is it supposed to be?"

"The best kind," Shim said. "The kind we can't get out of."

"Nonsense. Let's go back. We'll look for the hatch. And this time, we'll find it."

"Okay." Shim put his glasses back on. "Then let's keep going."

After five more breaks and a nigh-endless ascent, they gave up. Per Garrean's watch, they'd been walking for five hours; according to Shim's, it had been eleven.

Garrean was exhausted. His leg muscles felt like they were stuck in a plaster cast. “Let’s have a real break. Do you think you can sleep on the steps?”

“Right now, I could sleep anywhere.”

Garrean took another sip of water. That could be another problem.

Shim set down his glasses a few steps up. Surprisingly quickly, he found a position in which he could sleep. Garrean heard his secretary’s deep, regular breaths. He closed his eyes and listened to Shim’s breathing. At one point, it was as if he heard voices far in the distance, too quiet to be understood.

17.

Rhodan Makes His Choice

Rhodan had spent the night in a well-guarded prison cell. The room had no windows; the door had no handle. From the ceiling hung a small hemispherical object, most likely with a video camera inside, or some other surveillance device. The toilet exuded a chemical smell; it had no flush. There was drinking water in a convenient clay jug; it was fresh and aromatic.

So far, the cell made a modern impression and would have fit right into a prison on Earth. However, as in ancient times, two guards had apparently been posted in front of the door, sometimes arguing loudly with each other, at other times singing amicably. The lyrics the pair bellowed were mostly borderline nonsense interspersed with the most shameless obscenities Rhodan had ever heard.

His guards, who had brought him to the cell, had referred to this building as the "citadel." From the outside, it looked no higher than three stories. Inside, however, he had taken a long elevator ride into the depths. The corridors were narrow, with numerous locked doors made of armored glass blocking the way. But it wasn't the security architecture that unnerved Rhodan. His main worry was the fact that Tschubai wouldn't know where to look for him. On the other hand, it wasn't impossible that the Omenfather had imprisoned the others anyway, and that Tschubai hadn't resisted capture.

He drew a deep breath and shouted, "Ras! Thora! Chaktor!"

No one answered. His guards paid him no attention. They continued to kill time with song as full-throatedly as if there were no tomorrow.

Finally, Rhodan gave up. On the bed set into the wall lay a heat-sealed plastic bag. He tore it open and found two paper-thin thermal blankets inside. He spread one out over the bed and wrapped himself in the other. He couldn't turn off the light, so he

buried his head in his arm and fell asleep that way.

He slept astonishingly well. When he woke up, he could hear that the singing still continued in the corridor.

"Bravo!" he said. "I have Ambur's finest singers as guards."

The two guards had another argument; then they started singing again. Rhodan stood up and banged against the door with a fist.

"Breakfast!" he cried. "I'm hungry."

Instead of an answer, another verse followed.

Eventually, the door opened. Two armed men stepped inside and demanded that Rhodan follow him. The same singing that had accompanied him throughout the night still resounded in the hallway, but there were no singers, just a speaker system on a stand.

The corridor curved. Around the bend appeared another group of Ferrons, five or six men. Amongst them, Rhodan saw Thora, then Chaktor. With some relief, he ascertained that Tschubai was absent. Twice, the group had to stop on their way to him and wait for an armored glass door to be opened and closed again behind them.

Thora beamed at him. "A fine day for an execution," she said. Chaktor exploded with laughter. The Ferrons were no strangers to gallows humor, it seemed.

The guards brought them to the citadel's courtyard, where the white carriage was waiting. Rhodan squinted in Vega's glaring light; it was early morning. The cabin was open. They got inside, and the guards closed the door behind them before the carriage silently started moving.

Thora said, "They seized me right in the middle of town yesterday. I didn't know they'd also taken you and Chaktor."

"Where are the others?" Rhodan asked.

Neither of them knew anything about Sue, Bull, and Tschubai.

"Do we try to escape?" Chaktor asked.

"No." Rhodan couldn't imagine that the carriage would be transporting them through Ganashar unguarded. The guards were armed, and they weren't. Besides, an escape would prolong their separation from the other half of their group indefinitely.

They journeyed in silence until at last, the carriage stopped. The babbling of a large crowd blared against the vehicle's sides. Then, the door was opened from the outside and they stepped out into Ganarzynes Square.

The Ganasharans were standing tightly packed together. The Omenfather hadn't yet taken his place, but the high chair stood ready. Rhodan immediately noticed the difference in construction. To the left and right of the seat were two identical wooden stands, each bearing a wide, round flask. The spherical vessel's narrow neck was sealed shut with a stopper. Clearly, both flasks were made of a fireproof utility glass, since an ignited Bunsen burner was circling below each one.

The burners had to be sitting on top of motors; the circles they moved in were tight, but also broad enough to prevent any part of the glass from being heated so strongly that it melted—or worse, exploded. Nonetheless, it had to be blazing hot inside the vessel.

Inside both, twisting and turning in their torment, were whole clusters of Sharsharym. How could they still survive at this temperature—eight hundred degrees? A thousand? A soft but penetrating sound emanated from the glass beakers, a mixture of whistling, trilling, and clanking. Rhodan couldn't muster any sympathy for these creatures, but equally, the expressions of deep gratification on most of the onlookers' faces appalled him.

The crowd parted as if following some secret choreography. The Omenfather was on his way to the high seat. Following in his wake were Sue and Tschubai, walking side by side. An iron rod, about three meters long, kept them at a distance from one another. Leather straps affixed to each end had been placed around their necks. This meant Ras couldn't make physical contact with the girl. Did the Ganasharans know about his powers? Why were those two being paraded about in that way when he and the others could move freely while under guard? And where was Bull?

The Omenfather nimbly climbed up to the chair and repositioned the microphone. Only once he had taken his place and Rhodan had looked over the people's heads did he notice the change on the surrounding buildings' roofs. The Ganasharans had installed artillery there, man-sized missile launchers and other similarly portable military equipment.

Thora nodded to him. "Endgame."

The Omenfather began to speak. Again, Rhodan felt himself being put under a spell by the Ferron's oration. From his words, Rhodan gathered that the Omenfather didn't know exactly who they were, these strangers before him. An explanation other than that they were spies, perhaps for Garrean, perhaps for Guall, might not

be out of the question. This didn't mean, however, that another explanation would do to dispel his worries and those of Ganashar's citizens.

"They were examined in the healing house, and based on this, we must assume we are dealing with genetically manipulated creations. Creatures of the military gene industries. To my knowledge, they have yet to demonstrate their special abilities to us. We must reckon with the possibility that their commanders have instructed them to deploy these gifts only when Ganashar is at its most vulnerable."

Rhodan shook his head emphatically. He considered how he might get a word in edgewise. After all, the Omenfather had indicated yesterday that he'd have the chance to explain himself in front of Ganashar's residents.

"Yesterday, I offered Citizen Rhodan a choice," said the Omenfather at that moment. "It was he who made contact with us. But he refused to take a stand. We will ask him again today."

He stopped talking, and everything went silent. Suddenly, two Ferrons in white protective suits were standing at the chair's base. Their hands were covered by metal gloves, and they each held a Sharctash. Assistants put a kind of diving helmet with an oval viewing panel on each of them and secured it to the suit. Rhodan watched as the two women went over to the stands with the glass beakers and then, very slowly and in the same rhythm, ascended the rungs.

"Citizen Rhodan," said the Omenfather. "If someone or other were to endanger the lives of your companions along with that of the community of Ganashar, which side would you choose?"

"The side of Ganashar," Rhodan replied. The Ferron's wording ultimately left no other choice.

"You would make your contribution, then."

It wasn't entirely clear to Rhodan if this was a question or a statement. He noticed Thora casting him a warning glance.

"Yes," he said.

The two Ferrons in protective suits were just pulling out the glass jars' stoppers. Neither was lifted off completely, merely carefully released and turned. Nonetheless, the two women each managed to slide their Sharctash into the vessel. A waft of peppermint filled the air. With one quick motion, each of the pair had retrieved a Sharsharym and pulled it out. As they climbed

down the ladders, they held their sticks in outstretched arms away from themselves. The Sharsharym twisted and turned like ghosts made of liquid emerald. They tried to bite their captors on the wrists or arms. Rhodan watched the scene with as much fascination as dismay.

The Omenfather said, “We found him near the radar station. We therefore no longer see it as a coincidence that we picked up you and your companions there.”

Who is he talking about? Rhodan wondered. Somewhere in the crowd, a tumult arose—outraged cries grew loud. Rhodan noticed that the Omenfather’s guards had their weapons aimed at him. Others had taken Thora and Chaktor by the arm. The two Ferron women in protective suits were standing directly behind Sue and Tschubai. They were holding their Sharctash over the pair’s heads, the snakelike creatures shimmering in Vega’s light like lanterns. The crowd drew back. An armed group carried a figure into the square and threw him down in front of Rhodan’s feet.

It was Reginald Bull.

At a hand gesture from the Omenfather, all went silent and still. Only Bull’s whistling breaths could be heard. He looked wretched. He struggled to at least prop himself up on his elbows or lift his head, but again and again, he sank back down.

Suddenly, Eneida was next to Bull, looking just as drained. Two guards had linked arms with her and were holding her upright. The two men’s uniforms reminded Rhodan of the monocle-wearer’s livery.

At that moment, the guards let go of Eneida and she sank to her knees. She was clearly not as weak as Bull but made no move to get to her feet again. One of her guards walked up behind her with a projectile weapon drawn and aimed it at the back of her head, three fingerbreadths away from her skull.

“What we do, we do for Ganashar,” said the Omenfather. “We make our contribution. Even the bitterest one.”

He gave the guard a small signal with his hand. The guard fired, and Eneida tipped forward without a sound.

The silence across the square had a stifling, deafening quality. Why was no one screaming? Rhodan caught sight of movement in the background. He looked around and thought he could see Yinye for a moment, tapping against her forehead with her Sharctash.

The Omenfather waved a hand at the two women standing

behind Sue and Tschubai. They lowered the Sharctash bearing the snakelike beings even farther. Rhodan saw the two humans' eyes widen. Tschubai stared at Rhodan, his brow furrowed.

"Now you have a choice before you. How will you choose?" the Omenfather asked. It almost sounded friendly. He smiled at Rhodan and looked at him with curiosity. "Will you pay the price along with the traitor: you and the woman and the child and the two men? Or will you fully come over to Ganashar's side and punish the traitor?"

Rhodan's thoughts swirled. What had happened? Had Bull tried to flee? Why? Because he'd been told that Rhodan had been imprisoned? Or was it all just an act staged by the Omenfather? And which role did the Omenfather envision for him? How was he supposed to "punish" Bull?

One of the two guards passed Rhodan his weapon. "There's only one round inside," the Ferron man said quietly. "Aim well." He took a step back and gestured toward Bull. Only now did Bull manage to lift his head slightly and turn it to the side. He stared at Rhodan but didn't seem to entirely understand what was going on. Finally, an inarticulate sound passed his lips.

The Omenfather said, "Make your contribution, Citizen Rhodan. Shoot the traitor."

18.

Guall's Last Journey

The evacuation was progressing rapidly now. You could have set your watch by the space flights' launches and landings. Like everyone else, the Thort had grown used to the periodic rising and falling noise from the spaceport. For the time being, he had left contact with Ambur's leadership to his officials. Three or four times, he had spoken with a certain Vela Waygen. She was Garrean's deputy, and he'd instantly taken a liking to her and her slightly crooked face.

Only the day before had Guall learned through Waygen—and then only in passing—that the governor was currently missing. Apparently, he had most likely gone into the lands outside the city, possibly to root out hidden groups who were eager to stay put. She'd expressed the fear that no small number of Amburans were trying to seek refuge in the inhospitable regions beyond the plain. Others would entrench themselves in their houses.

"Yes," Guall had said. "Of course. And when the time comes, we'll deal with it."

His nonchalance had no doubt calmed her.

When the time comes. The scout had granted them this time, which they knew nothing about, but which would be finite. In the end, how many Ferrons would be clinging to Ambur, hidden in a wrecked car in one of the city's junkyards, in an empty house, in an oxygen tent in the mountains? He even recalled a message suggesting there was an entire settlement staging a resistance, an anarchist utopia somewhere in the outback whose name he had forgotten.

Guall felt no anger toward these dissidents. They were downright lovable in their fight for Ambur, where they felt as though they had to draw breath more intensely, had to risk more than on Ferrol, Rofus, or Pigell, and could live more luminous lives in return. Only, the great stopgap that was Ambur would soon

evaporate.

Lost in this thought, Guall beheld the Vega system with his eye. That was why he glimpsed it immediately after it appeared—without the slightest indication of whether it had come from or how.

The entity's outline was a little blurry to him, as were its details. But without a doubt, it was there, and it was floating splendidly, immune to all laws of nature, by the side of a mountain: a cylinder sitting straight up in the air—cobalt blue.

Every journey hides a secret. Some of these secrets reveal themselves along the way, others long after you've reached the goal or returned home again. Some never. Often, the journeys with the clearest, most obvious destinations turn out to be the most puzzling.

Guall wondered what secret this journey would reveal to him, or if it would keep its mystery hidden from him. In his long life, the Thort had lost a great deal: companions, devoted soldiers, clever bedmates, among them even some whom he could have told he loved without lying.

For a while, he'd believed that the secrets could balance out the losses, that they could enrich his life and make it more valuable. For a while, he'd kept this hope hanging from the beam, and then, after a certain blow, he didn't remember which anymore, he'd given up and let go. He'd fallen and felt like he could hear laughter from an almost endless distance away, so quiet and yet drowning out all the sounds of his worries for a moment.

The polycopter's rotors fought through the thin air; the bulging helium balloons on its sides made the aircraft sway softly. Vocotósh had ensured that it was again the familiar Tekpach from the *Caresc Cao*.

Shortly before launch, his steward had put an airtight container full of provisions in the cockpit. Guall had briefly looked inside, smirked, and said, "This would be enough for a picnic."

"Should I come with?"

Guall could only laugh at such benevolence. "Let it be, my good man. When I'm back, we'll eat together. I'm not leaving this world."

"The world is a narrow footbridge," Guall had said, quoting a verse from the *Idols' Unity*. He had stroked his temples, struck by this moment of inspiration. Then he'd closed the cabin roof and

started up the polycopter.

Now, he had been flying for almost three hours. He had still received no communication officially informing him of the cobalt blue cylinder's presence in the Vega system or on Ambur. It wasn't the first time he'd seen this vehicle—or one like it—with his third eye.

Now, however, he saw it with his other two eyes. The polycopter was heading toward the cylinder. From a distance, it had merely looked as though the blue sky was thicker here, and swirling. Now, the sight had taken on an irrefutable physicality.

He flew the Tekpach close to the cylinder. It was keeping a distance of well under a hundred meters from the towering mountain face's bare granite. Openings appeared in the cobalt blue hull like widening pupils as countless objects that Guall intuitively took to be machines floated out through the hatches and toward the peaks, where they carried out some work that he couldn't grasp. Some of them sank into the stone as if it were a viscous liquid; others pulled diffuse, practically two-dimensional planes out of the rock, as if they were harvesting shadows.

The process lasted only a few minutes, then the machines moved away and returned to the ship. The openings had closed without Guall noticing how.

All of a sudden, the cylinder accelerated, rose into the sky, and disappeared from view. In its wake, the polycopter teetered a little but suffered no serious turbulence.

Guall steered the craft away from the massif and toward Karbush. After a few minutes, he slowed down and went lower. He considered landing—he had to think. Where could the cylinder have flown off to? There was no point waiting for a report from the army about this, or the space fleet. The cylinder doubtless possessed technology that let it evade detection by Ferron means.

Just as doubtless, it was in contact with the scout. Which meant there was no ruling out the possibility that some of the mysterious benefactors were on board.

He turned the polycopter and flew back toward the massif, albeit more slowly and at a lower altitude this time. There, he decided, he might be best positioned to pick up the cylinder's trail. It was an absurd plan, but he and Carfesch had made no agreement that required him *not* to make contact with the benefactors...which meant he was doing nothing wrong in trying to follow the cylinder.

And who, if not he, would be capable of tracking down the cobalt blue ship?

"Maintain course!" he told the autopilot. He closed his two eyes and opened his third.

But it wasn't an image of the cylinder that appeared before his special eye. Thort Guall recognized him immediately. The man who had his weapon aimed at another was the time traveler, Perry Rhodan. The man lying on the ground was Reginald Bull. He looked dazed, distraught, but no older.

Despite the many decades, neither of the men had changed. Why not? Were they ageless? Or had they traveled through time again, this time into the future, skipping past all those decades?

Guall felt his heart beating faster and harder. For decades, he'd hoped that Rhodan would appear again. Now he was here. But he wasn't on Rofus. He was on Ambur. Close enough to touch.

Guall focused to ascertain Rhodan's exact position. He saw something splintering, a confusion over life and death. Rhodan threatened to slip away from him, to vanish into the crowd. Guall cried out in disappointment, feeling for him, sensing him.

"Collision imminent," the autopilot reported. "Turning around."

"No!" Guall exclaimed in horror. "I have him!"

A jerk, a banging and crunching sound, a ferocious howl. The polycopter's front rotor had collided with the rock, the spinning blades beating against the rear rotor. The Tekpach rested on one side, then the other. The cabin lifted up as the polycopter collapsed backward.

The helium balloons lessened the impact, but it was horrible enough nonetheless. Guall felt something breaking in his body, bursting. He sat completely still.

"I have sent a distress signal," the autopilot said. "Space landing units are en route with a rescue squad."

Guall remained silent.

"The pattern of the stars is frozen music," the Thort said in lieu of a greeting. "That's what we Ferrons say. What do your kind say?"

Carfesch had opened the cabin and was looking at Guall. His seven-fingered hands ran over the Thort's face, over his limbs, under his thermal poncho. Guall let it happen. He looked into the scout's sightless blue eyes and wondered how the other had gotten there. Had Guall briefly been unconscious and not noticed

Carfesch's arrival?

"My kind," the scout said, "don't say much."

"How is it among them?"

"Different than here."

Guall attempted a smile, but smiling was such a strenuous effort, so energy-sapping, especially when he still had so much to say. "Ambur," he managed.

Carfesch pulled his hands back. "Soon the planet will have been cleared," he said. "I have reason to be grateful to you."

Guall spared himself any reply. Carfesch, too, fell silent.

Guall felt himself growing weaker. It felt good. So much had suddenly been pushed so far away. Life was letting him out of its clutches. He'd gladly have given into the allure of this new freedom, but there was still the Vega system. He was convinced he had to make the scout remember. The Thort, the only assurance of freedom, couldn't be broken.

"Thort," he uttered, barely audible.

"The Thort lives," Carfesch said. "And he will live."

Guall felt waves of pain rolling over him, one after another—but oddly, they didn't touch him anymore. The pain was distant and inconsequential, as if he were lying at the bottom of a deep, crystal clear ocean and watching a storm raging on the surface.

"I'm going to close your eyes now," Carfesch told him. "Look with your third eye. It's all ready."

It turned dark, and it turned light. The room would have been flooded with light if the curtains hadn't held it back to some extent. It was still in the room and yet not. He heard breathing, movement, steps.

On the table stood a small fountain with a statue depicting a beautiful, unclothed Ferron woman pouring a jug of water into a bowl. The jug appeared to be inexhaustible, for it was the Jug of Life, and the idealized Ferron stood for the All-Giving Ve, both of which the *Idols' Unity* sang. Guall heard the soft splashing.

On the bed lay a young Ferron woman. Her features were less regular than those of Ve. She was exhausted by the exertion and the pain, and confused, satisfied, perplexed. An older woman had her hands full of bloody linens. She was looking away from the woman in the bed and at the man who stood there, stock-still, holding a newborn child. He cradled the small body in his left arm while his right supported the soft back of the child's head. His face, too, bore

the shadow of a certain unease, even though the life in his arms had long since gained power over him.

Two eyes on the newborn's tiny face were closed; he was breathing evenly. As Guall watched, the baby's third eye flicked open for a moment, looked at him, and—Guall had no doubt about this—recognized him.

Guall understood. The Thort lived. And he would live.

He let go of the little still left to let go of.

Carfesch waited until Guall was dead. Out of the pale sky, three Ferron space vehicles descended with great clamor.

The ship informed him that two intruders, Ferrons, had been placed under entanglement. Carfesch asked if it was still possible to rewrite their memories and set them down again. The ship, as smug and impudent as ever, told him that the entanglement was too advanced and that releasing them would bear great risks.

Carfesch had the details transmitted to him, evaluated them, and was forced to concede the ship's point. As the Ferrons, equipped with all manner of medical equipment, rushed toward the polycopter, Carfesch inconspicuously moved away.

"By the way," he told the ship a while later, "I'm expecting more uninvited guests to come on board soon."

"I will place them under entanglement," the ship announced.

"No," Carfesch said. "Let them be. I'd like to observe what they do in that situation."

19.

Rhodan in Turmoil

Rhodan was conscious that quite a number of guards had him in their sights. He extended his arm and aimed at Bull. Suddenly, understanding dawned on Bull's face. Rhodan weighed the weapon in his hand, studied the barrel, tried to estimate the caliber.

"What exactly did he betray?" he called to the Omenfather. "The settlement's location? The Ferrons in Karbush have known that for a long time." He sensed the assembled Ferrons turning to the Omenfather, very much expecting an answer. "I'm similarly unable to grasp what the medic is supposed to have betrayed."

"He tried to procure an escape vehicle," the Omenfather said. "And she was reckless."

"Most certainly a crime worthy of death," Rhodan sneered. "And a great spectacle. Why do you need all this?"

"Because we're determined."

"To kill one another? And a wave of your hand is enough?"

"We have a right to defend ourselves."

"Of course," Rhodan said. "If you're attacked." He raised an arm and swung the weapon, very slowly, in the Omenfather's direction.

The Ferron kept a straight face. "Before the weapon is aimed entirely at me, you'll be dead," he said calmly into the microphone.

Rhodan stopped the motion. His arm was still extended, but the weapon wasn't directed at the Omenfather. He nodded inconspicuously at Tschubai.

"Very prudent," the Ferron said. "And now—"

Now Rhodan fired. A loud bang resounded, then a second right afterward. One of the two glass beakers had shattered. The Sharsharym fell to Earth like thunderbolts. It smelled like peppermint.

Rhodan flung the useless weapon into one of the guards' faces. The crowd erupted in panic. He saw Tschubai disappear from the

iron rod's hold, then instantly appear again next to Sue. He touched her, then vanished again.

Rhodan bent down to Bull, grabbed him under the arms and started to drag him. The crowd had lost all cohesion, like a puzzle someone had thrown in the air. Suddenly, Chaktor was on Bull's other side, grabbing him and pulling him along. But where to?

Thora briefly appeared amid the fray and made an imperious gesture in the direction in which the Ferron was dragging Bull. Rhodan didn't hesitate any longer.

We won't make it, he thought without a hint of despair. At least Sue and Tschubai were safe. A high whistling tone rang out, grew louder, softer, pulsating. *You're leaving it kind of late, old friend,* Rhodan thought, amused.

The alarm and the crowd's hundreds of screaming voices were drowned out by an infernal roar. The ground vibrated. Thora dug her fingers into the material of his sleeve to keep from being swept away.

It's not about us at all anymore, Rhodan realized. Projectiles were launching, presumably antiaircraft missiles. Karbush's military was making a strike against Ganashar. Ganashar was fighting back. Bull, Thora, Chaktor, and Rhodan were no more than beneficiaries of this maneuver.

Cold fury shot through him. Why couldn't Karbush have attacked a few minutes earlier? Eneida could have lived.

They fled through a maze of alleys and stairways that could have been ripped out of a European city from the Middle Ages. This was how he pictured the Old Town of Prague. *Home of the Golem.*

In the distance, they heard shots, explosions, the technological thunder of a battle. Some Ferrons forced their way past them and took refuge in the buildings. Rhodan heard their cries: "The Dark Age, the Dark Age!"

Would this be the explanation for the tenth planet's disappearance? Would the Dark Age begin again on this world? Would the planet be destroyed in the course of this conflict?

Unlikely. As immense as this debacle would be for Ganashar's inhabitants, it wasn't the end of the world. But hadn't Thora mentioned rumors that portended the end of the world?

Bull coughed and got up, wheezing. "Thanks, by the way." He coughed again. "For not shooting me."

Rhodan grinned. “Always be generous when it doesn’t cost a penny,” he said.

“Where to?” Thora asked.

“Where will Tschubai be?” Rhodan asked back.

Bull quietly swore to himself, repeatedly interrupted by coughing. The roar of battle rose and fell in waves. Rhodan considered whether Tschubai might have teleported into the healing house. *Probably not.* That was not a place Bull or Sue would gladly return to. Thora’s house? Tschubai’s?

Suddenly, a number of Ferrons stormed into the alley. “Sharsharym!” screamed a woman as she ran past. Rhodan grabbed Bull and tried to pull him along.

Then an emerald-green *something* slid into the alley and turned toward their group with inscrutable urgency. Like an apparition, Yinye was suddenly standing between them and the beast, making her Sharctash whirl and sweeping the green figure against the wall. For a moment, the creature clung there, then it slid up and out of sight.

“What are you doing here?” Rhodan asked.

The young Ferron’s gaze wandered attentively over his face. “They’re at my place,” she said at last. “The others of your group are at my place.”

Rhodan stared at her in disbelief. How could she know that? She’d just been standing in the square. She reached out as if pointing over the wall to the other side. “My house is that way. Don’t you recognize where you are?” He swallowed. Had he instinctively run in this direction? Or was it a trap?

“I smelled the Sharsharym,” she said. “And you.”

“Me?”

She turned around without another word. She didn’t check to see if Rhodan and the others were following her. Not two minutes later, they were standing in Rhodan’s quarters. Sue and Tschubai greeted them.

“I know where we can get a vehicle,” Bull said. His voice sounded raw. “A kind of air cushion car.”

“A ground-effect vehicle,” Thora said.

Bull cast a comically desperate glance at Rhodan.

“Where do we want to head for?” Tschubai asked.

Thora pointedly looked in Yinye’s direction. Rhodan turned to face the Ferron. “It might be better if you don’t know where we’re

trying to go."

"The Omenfather won't do anything to me," she said. "I have confessed to everything. I will be a wall."

Rhodan stared at her. "You're pregnant?"

A series of detonations rolled over the settlement. The pulsating sound of alarm sirens could still be heard from multiple directions.

Rhodan looked at the Ferron. Her copper-colored hair had always reminded him of rust—a metallic cowl. No Ferron had ever seemed as vulnerable to him as Yinye. "You can't stay here," he decided. "You're coming with us."

Yinye smiled wanly. "If you only knew how sick I am of that tone. The tone of the Omenfathers of every world."

Rhodan was about to say something, but Thora cut in, telling Bull, "I know a place where there might be vehicles. But it's a long way from here. Do you know somewhere closer?"

Bull shook his head.

"I do," Yinye said. "Come with me."

20.

Garrean in the Cistern of Time

"Wake up! Wake up!"

Garrean shook his head with reluctance and reached for the hand shaking his shoulders. "Leave me alone. We're not in any rush."

"Wake up!" The voice sounded almost horrified now.

He sighed deeply in acquiescence, rubbed his closed eyes, and sat up. "That's enough now," he said.

He turned to Shim to ask why he'd woken him up, but Shim was now pretending to be asleep.

"Stop that," Garrean said. Shim didn't respond, so he grabbed his companion by the shoulder and shook him. Still no response. "Wake up!" said Garrean. "Wake up!"

Shim mumbled something.

"Wake up!" Garrean shouted, shocked at the tone of his own voice. Was that panic?

"That's enough now," Shim said. He rubbed his closed eyes and sat up. "Did I miss something?"

"No," Garrean replied, running a hand through his stubbly hair. "Everything's fine." He paused a moment to think. "Did you try to wake me up?"

Shim looked at him in disbelief. "You woke me up."

"I had a dream."

Shim hesitated. "Me too."

Garrean considered whether to ask his secretary what he'd dreamed about. Parents could ask their children that question up to a certain age; couples could ask each other after their first night spent together; but a governor couldn't ask his secretary. And yet, his curiosity was almost unbearable.

They ate a little of their provisions and drank. Shim titled his head and touched his forehead with the tips of his three middlemost fingers in a bashful gesture.

“I have to... I’d quite like to relieve myself.”

“Oh, of course,” Garrean said. “Do it. I’ll go ahead a few rotations and wait for you.” He sensed Shim’s hesitation. “Don’t tell me you’re afraid I’ll run away from you?”

“No,” Shim said. “I just don’t want us to lose one another.”

A humorous remark was on the tip of Garrean’s tongue, but he swallowed it. “I’ll talk,” he said. “I’ll walk slowly and keep talking.”

“Thanks,” Shim said quietly, putting those three fingers to his forehead again.

Garrean started walking. What should he talk about? A few verses from the *Litany of the Idols’ Unity* came to mind, and he recited them. Some verses, he repeated several times before proceeding with the text.

“I’m here,” came Shim’s voice behind him shortly thereafter. “Thanks!”

They both resisted the temptation to check the time. Garrean sporadically counted the steps, but he didn’t keep it up all the time and stopped counting altogether when he got to four thousand. Nothing changed in the shaft.

Eventually, he couldn’t hold his bladder anymore either. They switched places. Shim went on ahead. To his surprise, he heard Shim also reciting phrases from the Litany, though in a strange-sounding melody. Not one as pretty as an ordained Chaklan of the Litany sang, but pretty nonetheless. Garrean hummed along, passed water, and watched as his urine covered step after step and flowed down. When he was finished and kept going, he took care not to step in any of the puddles.

They took a break. They ate and drank. They walked on. At some point, they were tired and decided to sleep.

“My bottle is empty,” Shim said.

Garrean offered some from his own, but Shim refused.

“Stop that,” Garrean said. “Making me force you all the time. Don’t talk, just drink.”

Shim raised it to his lips, took small gulps, and then drank with a voracity that angered Garrean. He tore the bottle out of his secretary’s hands.

“Forgive me,” Shim implored him.

Garrean bit his lip, already more annoyed with himself than his secretary. He closed the bottle, not touching the water. Then, he fumbled around in his pockets and found one last Phaun praline. He

considered eating it, or perhaps splitting it with Shim. But the praline would make him thirsty.

His sleep was fitful, and he woke up several times. He heard Shim's breath, which was sometimes slow and deep, but then rapid and wheezing, as if his secretary were ascending a steep hill in his dreams.

After their morning ritual—each relieving himself while the other went ahead reciting a few excerpts from the *Idols' Unity*—they continued climbing the stairs together.

Garrean insisted that Shim drink the rest of the water, but his thirst grew strong. His mouth turned dry. They avoided speaking—what did they have to say anyway?

Garrean saw it before his companion, and his first thought was that he was hallucinating. Far below them, something was different; something interrupted the monotony of glass steps, like a shadow stepping out of the wall. They walked more slowly, and Garrean convinced himself it was out of caution, not softness.

Then it had reached them. A basin full of water bulged from the wall.

"You first!" he ordered Shim. His secretary refused and took a step backward up the stairs.

Garrean scooped up the water in his hand and drank. Then he filled his bottle. The water level in the basin hadn't sunk. Shim stepped over and plunged his face into it.

"How does it taste?" Garrean asked.

"Like water."

They laughed until their sides hurt.

"Maybe we should stay here," Shim suggested. "We'd have water."

"Eventually, we'll need more than water," Garrean replied. "Protein. Carbohydrates. Fat."

Shim saw the wisdom in that. And yet, they both found it so hard to leave the basin behind that they convinced each other to stay the night there. Garrean got out the praline, unwrapped its cellophane, and awkwardly broke it into two pieces. He gave Shim the slightly larger one. That was their dinner.

The next morning, they drank their fill.

"There must be a main transporting the water into the basin," Shim mused.

"So?"

They investigated the basin but couldn't find any visible inflow. Working together, they pulled at it but couldn't loosen it from the wall.

"Let's go," Garrean said.

They slept three more times. Their ritual—one urinating while the other recited the *Litany*—was well practiced by now. Hunger was making itself less obtrusive than Garrean had expected.

"Maybe we're taking in other nutrients with the water," Shim assumed.

"Possibly," Garrean replied.

Shim developed a few more theories, with compressed wormholes playing roles alongside parareal simulations or a complex drug high.

"You think we're both experiencing the exact same hallucination?" Garrean asked.

"Not necessarily. Who's to say that you're real?"

"Me," said Garrean.

"So says the hallucination."

Garrean stopped walking so suddenly that Shim bumped into him.

"Something there?" Shim looked over Garrean's shoulder. Then he saw it too. "Oh!"

A few steps below them were two balls. They were transparent and thus required concentration to see against the glass steps. Garrean and Shim took two steps at once, crouched, and took a closer look at their discovery.

"Perfect spheres," Shim said. "Completely flawless."

Eventually, Garrean reached out and touched one of the balls. It was too big to grasp entirely in his hand and much lighter than Garrean would have expected for its size. In fact, it weighed nothing.

He held the ball at eye level and let it go. For a moment, it looked as though it was just sitting in midair. Then he watched as the ball sank, albeit very slowly.

"Interesting," said Shim.

"What's so interesting about that?"

Garrean reached for the ball. It let itself be caught with no resistance, no motion to escape. He pressed against it a little, and—to his surprise—it yielded, though only to a certain point. When he released the pressure, it returned to its original shape.

“A toy for children,” Shim said. “Maybe they’re trying to keep us in a good mood.” He touched the second ball with his index finger and rolled it back and forth a little. “Fun,” he said.

For a moment, Garrean had a vision of them both, he and his secretary, growing old here, sitting beside one another for years and decades, playing with these transparent balls.

After a while, Shim said, “Maybe it’s a test. They want to know how we respond to the balls and draw conclusions from it.”

“And how are we supposed to respond to them?”

“I don’t know.”

Garrean looked contemplatively at the sphere. Then he threw it down the steps. The ball fell unnaturally slowly, landed unnaturally softly, and bounced unnaturally far. It didn’t touch the wall, but followed the course of the spiral staircase.

Shim put his ball into the same satchel where he was keeping his tablet.

“What does your tablet show, actually?”

“Nothing,” Shim said. “No reception. It doesn’t work at all anymore. I told you that already.”

Garrean didn’t remember that, but he didn’t say anything.

They continued their descent.

Garrean woke up and saw that Shim was still sleeping. He let him sleep, thinking about his time in the military with the space fleet. Remembering took him some effort; only occasionally did an individual scene stick out from the amorphous mass of past. What he did see were not overly spectacular memories either, but meaningless trivialities: a party with crewmates; a flight to Ambur; a woman—Vion? Smaay?—dressed in a skirt, sitting on the desk in front of him as she threw one leg over the other; a winter thunderstorm that took his breath away. It was like a membrane had covered his earlier life, a subtly blue-toned membrane that shut him off from everything he’d done before entering the cylinder with Shim.

In the Cistern of Time, he thought—or another voice inside him thought. Some of his thoughts seemed foreign to him lately.

Shim woke up and stretched. He reached for his glasses and put them on.

“Shall we keep going?” Garrean asked, in an enterprising mood.

“These,” Shim said deliberately, “are not my glasses.”

He passed them to Garrean as evidence. Garrean took them. He'd never looked closely enough at Shim's glasses to tell if they were his or not.

After two more sleep phases, Garrean found his secretary bleary-eyed and very pale. His lower lip was bitten.

"The glasses?" Garrean asked, worried.

"No," Shim said tonelessly. "My right eye. It's not my eye anymore."

"Can you not see?"

"No, I can," he said. "Only, it's not my eye that's seeing."

"Understood," Garrean said quietly.

"It's not my eye anymore."

It took time for Shim to calm down. Garrean was patient. He'd stopped looking at the clock a long while ago, but he was sure that everything in this staircase was unfolding outside of time. There was absolutely no hurry.

When they next reached a water basin, Garrean observed Shim narrowing first one eye, then the other.

"I'm not drinking this," Shim said.

"Why not?"

"I'm not drinking anything with *something like that* swimming around in it."

"I don't see anything," Garrean answered.

"You can't see it. I only see it with the *other* eye." It sounded a touch haughty.

"You have to drink," Garrean insisted.

Shim refused.

Garrean wanted to know what exactly Shim saw in the water, but his secretary wouldn't answer. He only learned that it was nothing disgusting, nothing frightening. But then, why didn't he want to drink it?

"I just can't. There's no way."

Garrean maintained that Shim had to drink, but Shim refused. It turned into a dreadful showdown. Garrean begged, ordered, and ultimately threatened, "Drink, or I'll go on without you."

At last, Shim drank. He drank, wiped his mouth, and grumbled something to himself. Garrean couldn't tell whether Shim was cursing him or reciting something from the *Litany of the Idols' Unity*.

After a while, Garrean couldn't stand the muttering anymore. He walked faster and faster so that he didn't have to hear it so

loudly. Shim stayed behind.

When Garrean lay down on the steps to sleep this time, he was full of anger. Shim would have to step over him. He slept restlessly, and when he awoke, he heard Shim grumbling in the distance, still far above him.

Garrean waited. Why wasn't Shim getting any closer? Did he not dare? Garrean's anger had long since subsided.

"Shim!" he called. "Come on, Shim!"

Shim didn't come. Garrean waited. Eventually, he started making his way up toward Shim with a sigh.

Later, out of breath, he cried, "Shim! Come on now!"

The muttering had grown neither louder nor softer, and definitely no more comprehensible.

"At least answer me!" Garrean shouted. Losing his temper, he started to rush up the spiral staircase, taking two steps at a time, until he collapsed, out of breath. He tried to call out but couldn't.

He closed his eyes and fell asleep.

All was silent. Garrean called for Shim a few times, but with no hope left anymore. He got up and walked downward. Soon, he reached a water basin and drank his fill.

He took the steps more slowly than before, continuing to descend. There was no other way.

I've plunged into the Cistern of Time, he thought. *And I've exceeded the point at which time turns into eternity.*

Garrean smiled when he saw that he wasn't alone.

"Shim," he said, stumbling.

Was that really his voice? His voice had been out of use for so long. How many hundreds, how many thousands of sleep periods had he not spoken for now? He squinted to see the figure a little more clearly.

Was that Shim? But who else could it be?

The one before him was tall and very thin. Had Shim ever been that tall and thin? How big and unimaginably blue his eyes were. And where were his glasses? Had Shim become clear-sighted over the years?

"Is that you, Shim?" he asked. This unfamiliar speaking was a strain to him. His words sounded odd in the space.

The other person stayed silent and looked at him through those

surreally large and blue eyes.

"Say something," Garrean entreated him. "Speak to me."

"I'm not Shim," came a soft voice as melodic as a Chaklan reciting from the *Idols' Unity*.

Garrean nodded. "I know." The bones in his neck cracked, and he found it a struggle to concentrate. He asked, "Have I reached the end of the staircase?"

"You tell me," the pleasant voice proposed.

"How am I supposed to know that?"

"No one can know apart from you."

"And I'm supposed to know?" Garrean said to his own amusement. He raised both hands, and his arms. He presented the voice with his wrinkled skin, pale with age. "I don't even know if I'm alive or dead."

"One doesn't have to rule out the other."

"Some might see it differently."

"How do you see it?"

Garrean considered. "Seeing—I haven't been able to do that clearly for a long time."

He sensed the other person extending an arm. The calloused hand looked clawlike, and it had too many fingers. Seven?

"Hmm," said Garrean, but he held still as the two outer fingers touched his eyes. Would it hurt? No. The touch was a blessing. Garrean breathed a sigh.

The fingers pulled away from his irises. He could see again. See like never before. He saw the spiral staircase that led down into endless depths and farther up than he'd ever thought possible. However, all walls had dissolved. He looked at the landscape that spread out around him. He had seen it once before, eternities ago, when he'd looked through the glass dome while balanced on his secretary's head. It was the County of Kush.

A bungalow stood high above Byton Lake. In Vega's light, the sea appeared to be in flames; the stone hollows on its banks were glowing, but someone had filled them with layers of Bourinc bark. It was a man. A space soldier. His eyes were calm, his hands large—as large as if they had to shield the entire world. Next to him was a woman. Lost in thought, she stroked her copper-colored braid. They both looked at him, smiled, and waved.

"Can I go out to them?" Garrean asked.

"You are free to."

“Will I see Shim again too?”

“Why not?” the man asked in his wonderful singsong.

“So the staircase ends here,” Garrean determined.

“Nothing ever ends,” the voice replied. “Everything is a beginning.”

Garrean looked at him. There was no nose on the man’s face. Where the nose should have been, a thin membrane of skin quivered over an oval opening and rustled almost inaudibly.

Only at this moment did he realize that the other man had not given him a name. Now, of course, they were long past the point at which names mattered.

The figure extended an arm. It held a ball in its hand, so flawlessly transparent that Garrean feared losing sight of it even though it was right in front of him.

“What is that?” he asked.

“It’s for you.”

Garrean held out his open hand, and the other figure placed the ball into it. It was unimaginably light. Carefully, he closed his ancient hands around it. He felt the lightness of the sphere pass over to him and felt all weakness vanishing, all persistence, as he was lifted up and then carried out, home into the world newly beginning.

21.

Rhodan and the Cobalt-Blue Ship

Bull sat at the ground-effect vehicle's controls without being asked and took a good look at the instruments. "How do I start this song?"

Pointing in from outside the vehicle, Yinye indicated a white button with an upward arrow engraved in it.

Thora, Chaktor, and Tschubai had taken a seat in the cabin's rear. Sue sat up front, tightly pressed against Bull. Next to the girl, there was still space for Rhodan.

"I should steer," Rhodan said.

"You should," Bull said. "But you'd have to get in first."

"Yeah."

Yinye stared at him. "You're nothing but a pest."

He smiled somewhat wryly.

"Go already!" she said. "It's not like it has to be goodbye forever."

"It doesn't," Rhodan said, and got in.

Yinye turned away and walked off, slowly at first, then beginning to run.

Bull muttered something, then closed the cockpit and started the aircraft. He tapped on the control stick with his index finger as Rhodan nodded and grabbed on. The vehicle glided off the ground. They saw a few burning buildings; Ferrons were recovering injured people from the streets and ruined houses. The alarms had gone silent.

Thora said, "The girl was probably lying when she said she was pregnant. At least, I don't think she could be pregnant by you."

Rhodan nodded slowly. But what if it *were* possible? If the similarity between Ferrons and humans was no mere biological analogy? He looked at the glass-like material of the cockpit with Thora's face reflected in it. Thora, the woman born under an unfathomably distant star; Yinye and Eneida and Chaktor from

Vega; he, the man from Earth—why did they all resemble each other so strongly? Why were so many behaviors, so many social patterns on Vega's tenth planet so familiar to him?

Rhodan shook off that thought and tried to focus on more immediate questions. Where might the Omenfather and his troops be? How did things stand between the Ganasharans and the Ferrons from Karbush?

Soon, they'd left the densely populated region and were gliding between the Mouy fields. Three heavy Ferron military helicopters had landed on one of the fields. They weren't identical in construction. The largest and seemingly best-equipped aircraft boasted the Thort's emblem.

The soldiers who had climbed out of the helicopter appeared to be arguing. They took no notice of the ground-effect vehicle.

Rhodan steered their vehicle onto a street that led into a tunnel that should take them out of the caldera.

"Where are we flying to?" Tschubai asked.

Where *did* you fly to on a planet that was lost to reality?

"Would you be able to find your way back inside the mountain?" Rhodan asked. "To the transmitter?"

"No," said Tschubai.

"Then our only option is Karbush."

They drove for hours. Now and again, a formation of helicopters flew past overhead, sometimes one single aircraft. But they remained undetected.

Sue's head was resting against Bull's shoulder. Her eyes were closed, but she gave an impression of intense concentration nonetheless. Rhodan assumed that Sue was treating his friend with her gift to expedite his healing. From the look of it, Bull had been pumped full of drugs. Who had done that? And with what purpose? Bull didn't know; his memory was patchy and distorted.

They were together; they were alive. That was plenty. But their worries weighed heavy. Rhodan was afraid for Bull, afraid for Sue and Tschubai. With Thora, there was a special significance. She was close to him, no question, but it was a glassy closeness, as if the Arkonide were still covered by a second skin, an invisible film made of dragon's blood.

Rhodan saw it as an ongoing wonder that Chaktor remained with them as a matter of course. The Ferron had put his family

album on his lap and was guarding it with both hands. Rhodan imagined how Chaktor might, one distant day, open page after page to his great-grandchildren and place a finger on the portraits. *Reginald Bull. Ras Tschubai. Sue Mirafiore.* How would they look through a Ferron's eyes? How did he look through Chaktor's eyes?

Perry Rhodan. A pilot from Earth.

Why wasn't he on Earth right now? Why had he turned down the office of Administrator? Why had he embarked on this crazy expedition to find Crest and eternal life? Why had he followed the ghostly voice from Gol? Couldn't all expeditions to somewhere also be seen as an escape from somewhere? In the end, wasn't it a bitter joke that the search for eternal life had brought them into the death zone?

In front of them, a mountain range towered high. Wisps of clouds unraveled upon the blue peaks. The rock faces could mark the end of their path. Rhodan doubted he'd find a pass that the ground-effect vehicle could fly through.

"Uh-oh," Bull said.

His tone made Rhodan flinch. Bull pointed his thumb over his shoulder, and Rhodan followed the direction of his finger.

A cobalt-blue cylinder was moving silently across the sky and gliding toward the mountains.

"That's not a good idea," Bull said after Rhodan suggested following the cylinder. He'd explained to Bull that it looked like they were going the same way.

The craft was flying significantly faster than they were. For a moment, Rhodan feared what Bull may have been hoping—that the cylinder would fly off over the mountains, out of sight and out of reach. But his intuition hadn't deceived him.

The cylinder braked and came to a stop high above the rock face.

"Did you know that would happen?" Bull gave Rhodan a wary look.

"No. I don't exactly know the cylinder's flight plan."

"Shame, to be honest," Bull said. "Otherwise we'd know if they could give us a ride to Karbush."

Rhodan nodded.

"You can't be serious, man. You don't really want to board that thing."

"Why not?"

“Because we’d get shot?” Bull retorted. “Like the first time?”

Rhodan smirked. “I don’t remember being shot.”

“Because we ran,” Bull explained. “Maybe this time we can skip the running and just don’t get on board to begin with.”

“The scout might be on there,” Rhodan mused.

“That’s a rather risky ‘might,’” Thora interjected. “He *might* be on board and be unable to aid us at all.”

Rhodan grasped the control stick harder. His knuckles turned white. “Okay,” he said. “So what do we do instead? Fly back to Ganashar? Wait for the mountains to move aside and open up a path to Karbush for us? Or for our fuel to run out? Or our oxygen?”

Chaktor laughed out loud. “If the scout’s on board, they speak Ferron over there.”

“Good to know,” Bull chimed in. “Then we have the best odds of understanding our death sentence.”

“What are you expecting to gain from this?” Thora asked.

“It’s a spacecraft,” Rhodan said. “The ship of a technology that has transmitters at its disposal. That ship is probably the only vehicle far and wide that could take us home. Back to our time.”

They remained silent for a while. No one objected any further to Rhodan flying toward the cylinder.

The closer they came, the clearer it was that the ship was *doing something* with the mountains. However, none of them could understand the nature of this manipulation.

“What do you think?” Rhodan asked, turning to Thora.

“A multitude of new mights and maybes,” she said.

“Maybe...”

“...it’s releasing gas to induce the atmosphere’s evolution. It could be enriching the air with oxygen.”

“Hmm,” said Bull. “You think so?”

“No,” Thora replied. “Maybe the cylinder is an enormous engine that—together with numerous others—means to set the tenth planet in motion. To make Ambur itself into a spacecraft.”

Rhodan nodded, unconvinced.

“Maybe it’s digging a cistern,” Chaktor said.

“A rain gutter?” Bull asked in disbelief.

“A cistern for time,” the Ferron said. A single moment later, he laughed again. “Sorry. There’s an ancient Ferron legend.”

“Just one?” Bull grumbled.

“Tell us,” Rhodan prompted him.

Chaktor made a dismissive gesture. “A story from the realm of the dead. So it goes, there is a Cistern of Time in the universe—or several of them. In this cistern, time doesn’t progress anymore. Instead, it’s…well, saved. Or preserved.”

“Just in case.” Bull laughed.

“Like I said, it’s just a legend,” Chaktor said in an apologetic tone.

“Back to reality,” Tschubai interjected. “What do we do?”

“What do you think, Sue?” Rhodan asked.

The girl didn’t seem the least bit surprised by the question. “Let’s go over to the cylinder.”

It was as if Sue’s utterance had caused a dam to burst.

“Yeah,” Tschubai agreed. “Let’s try it. Worst case, we’ll turn around.”

“Yes,” Chaktor said too.

Thora nodded.

“Nothing more enthralling than collective suicide,” Bull remarked. He briefly rested his hand on Rhodan’s hand, which was still on the control stick, and said, “We don’t belong there, Perry.”

Rhodan laughed. “Where do we belong?”

Bull laughed back. “Okay. Let the record state that Rhodan’s self-destructive proposal was passed six votes to one.”

“Don’t you mean five to one?”

“Nope. Six. I let myself be dazzled by your optimism. Now I’m voting in favor too.”

“Then who’s the vote against?”

“That’s the voice of reason,” Bull explained. “As always, it echoes unheard.”

Rhodan stopped the vehicle at the foot of the mountain, practically in the cylinder’s shadow. Rhodan and Chaktor deactivated all of the aircraft’s machinery. Sue and Tschubai formed a mental cluster and touched the others.

They jumped.

Instantaneously, they were standing in a blue hall. They let go of each other and looked around. Bull took a few steps. Thora stood still, only turning her head. Rhodan couldn’t see a door in the gently curved walls. However, a spiral staircase ran through the room from floor to ceiling.

They had no difficulty breathing. Rhodan shut his eyes and drew a deep breath. With his eyes closed, he thought he could hear something far in the distance: the babbling of a water source, maybe, or distant voices.

He opened his eyes again. Sue and Tschubai were standing as if in a trance. Chaktor pressed the family album to his chest.

"Take a look at this," Bull said. He knelt on the floor and leaned left, then right, as if he wanted to catch sight of something lying there from various angles.

Rhodan stepped over to him. "Well? What is it?"

"Don't you see it?" Bull pointed at a spot on the floor. Now Rhodan noticed it too. A barely visible mark. "Something was stuck here," Bull said.

"What was it?"

"No idea." He got up again, clearly unsatisfied with this conclusion.

Several basins full of liquid protruded from the walls. Bull walked over to one of them, dipped his finger in, and licked it. "Water," he declared.

Rhodan went to the spiral staircase and cast a look first up, then down. A circular shaft. The steps were see-through, but with a faint hue to them; the deeper they went, the more they obscured.

The murmuring was coming from down there.

"There's someone walking around down there," said Bull, who had stepped up beside Rhodan without him noticing.

Rhodan concentrated. He thought he could distinguish two voices. Two people. Without understanding a single word, he heard something human in what was being said down there. Or Ferron. Or Arkonide.

"Hello?" Rhodan called. No response. He tried again, shouting as loudly as he could. Again, he received no answer.

"Should we go after them?" Thora asked, standing beside Rhodan now. "Maybe they could give us information."

Bull stared at his friend. On his face was something like the shadow of a nightmare—vague, endless horror. Rhodan could feel the hairs on the back of his neck standing on end.

"No," he decided. "We won't go down there."

Thora took a step back and gulped.

Sue and Tschubai were still standing in place, but Sue was holding her arms in front of her in the direction of the staircase, her

fingers splayed. Tschubai was shaking his head, barely perceptibly.

Rhodan cleared his throat and asked, “So…now what?”

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By Alexander Huiskes (Episode 21) and Wim Vandemaan (Episode 22)
Translated by Tiger Nicholaas de Young (Episode 21) and Philip Reuben (Episode 22)
Edited by Tess Nanavati
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